

Chapter 19
The Conservative Revolution:
Theology of the Priestly Writers

I.

While the Deuteronomists were completing this massive work of theological construction, representatives of the Jerusalem priesthood rose in exile to challenge their leadership and to express their own point of view.

To see what they were attempting to accomplish, we need to appreciate the situation that Judah faced in its exile. Following 586 B.C., when Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonian armies, the leading people of Judah--its priests, officers of the court of the king, and businessmen--had been taken into exile in Babylon, and they had to face a new and desperate situation. Their Temple was gone, the social and religious structures that had held their life together had been torn up, and they confronted the new question: how could the faith of the people in Yahweh their God be maintained? An answer began to emerge in terms of an historical analogy: this exile in Babylon was similar to the time seven centuries before when Israel had been wandering in the wilderness. Then, as now, the people had no nation, no king, no discernible future. But in the wilderness the people of Israel had become, literally, a community of faith. Could it happen again? Here in this exile, where the elements of life were so remarkably similar to what they had been then, could a new community of faith begin to emerge? The priests of Judah began to believe that it could and they set themselves to this restorative task.

The history of the Israelite priesthood is unbelievably complicated and even today we cannot reconstruct it in its entirety. Priests were integral to the religious scene in Canaan even before the first ancestors of the Israelites appeared in the land. When the family of Abraham arrived in Canaan, they found sanctuaries attended by priests already established in such places as Shechem, Dan, Bethel and Hebron, and the clans worshipped at these shrines. As the Israelite's confederation assumed control in Canaan under Joshua, these shrines became centers for the worship of Israel's God. By the time the confederacy was drawing to a close, the leading priestly family in Israel was that of Eli centered in Shiloh, and it was a priest from the family, Abiathar, who was the spiritual advisor to David. When David took over Jerusalem to be his capital, he found a well-established priesthood already functioning in the city, led by Zadok and his family: rather than make a choice between them, David allowed the two families to work side by side and the Zadokites, formerly priests of the temples of the Jebusites, now became priests of Yahweh. Perhaps the smooth and skillful way this family shifted allegiance from service of one god to the service of another shows something of the manner in which the priesthoods of the ancient shrines in Canaan had become Yahwistic; they had more loyalty to their profession than they had to their gods and would put their professional talents at the disposal of any conqueror who took over their land. In the struggle over a successor to David, the Zadokites supported the

proper candidate; whereas the house of Eli backed the Yahwist Adonijah, the house of Zadok pushed the candidacy of Solomon, like themselves a native of Jerusalem, and with Solomon's victory the Zadokites became again the leading priestly family in the capital city. But their victory did not disenfranchise the other priesthoods. Abiathar and his kinsmen continued to function as priests, though some of them scattered to shrines outside Jerusalem; priesthoods of local shrines still presided in their own locations; and the Levites continued to hunt places in which to exercise their priestly office. Levites, remnants of the ancient tribe of Levi which long ago had lost its lands and patrimony in the confederation, were a special cause of concern for all Israel: other clans and tribes accepted responsibility for the welfare of these displaced brethren, and they permitted them to act as priests at shrines within their cities and territories.

There were so many claimants to the office of priests because the office was a powerful and potentially wealthy one for its holders. Priests performed the offering of sacrifices and they collected the tithes of the people: temples therefore became centers of economic activity and, there being no coined money at the time, the temples surrounded themselves with storerooms for the collection of vegetable and grain sacrifices, pastures for the herds of sacrificial animals, and supply rooms to support the numerous activities in which they were engaged. The performance of sacrifice was only part of their task, however; they also mediated divine decisions, had the power to excommunicate offenders from the Israelite communities, and delivered Torah, that is, instructed the people of Israel and Judah how to act in certain critical situations of life.

The struggle for the right to retain this powerful and honored office continued even after the Zadokites had reasserted their supremacy in Jerusalem. The issue at first centered around the building of Solomon's Temple; the priesthoods of the shrines in northern Israel fought against the project since it cut into their revenues and prestige, and they continued to fight for their prerogatives. When northern Israel was destroyed, the priestly struggles persisted, and twice broke out in overt conflict in Judah. At the time of Mezekiah, the Zadokites made a concerted effort to suppress the ancient sanctuaries of Yahweh in the rural and provincial area outside the capital, but the combined resistance of the peasants and landholders fought off the attempt. What failed then succeeded under Josiah. In the reforms begun under the boy king, the Jerusalem priesthood had itself declared the one priesthood of the one sanctuary of the one God, and they repressed the rural shrines. The irony is that they accomplished this with the open assistance of the Deuteronomic underground, a portion of whom traced their lineage back to the former Yahwist sanctuaries of the provincial areas.

Not all the struggles the priests engaged in were among themselves: they were in constant conflict with other offices in Judah for the right to deliver Torah to the people. How should priests relate to the king, who claimed the right of passing judgment in civil and criminal matters, or with the elders of clan and tribe who reserved the same rights for themselves? How would they relate to the wise men of Israel whose ways of wisdom were designed to instruct people to live life more successfully, or to prophets and seers who delivered visions and messages from the Lord? The group that controlled Torah and was able to instruct people in proper behavior had the attention of the nation and could have its heart. The conflict between holders of these five offices was real and bitter. Each office pushed

its own claim, and the balance worked out between representatives of each was precarious at best.

In the exile one office did emerge as more powerful than the others, and that was the office of the priesthood. This did not happen immediately; with the destruction of the Temple, the priesthood lost the spiritual center of its authority. So, the Deuteronomists, being in less of a state of confusion than the priests, temporarily took control of the exilic community and that prophetic-scribal-priestly-courtly group became the primary carriers of the Judaic traditions. As the reasons for the devastation continued to be assessed, however, Judahites began to recognize that more groups than the priests had been discredited. Kings and courtiers had not been able to protect the safety of the people: since the fortunes of the Deuteronomists had been tied closely to that of the kings, the failure of kingship did not help their cause. The office of the wise man went into eclipse, the elders had already lost their control over their tribes, and with the coming of exile even prophets went into decline; only two have been identified, and the senior of the two, Ezekiel, was himself a priest who prophesied that the whole community of exiles would become "a kingdom of priests." It was the priests who were about to regroup in order to put together the shattered pieces of Israel's life.

They followed the lines suggested by Ezekiel. He had said that Judah would become a holy community, a kingdom of priests. Note the phrase: not only were the priests to take over the governance functions of Judah's life that kings had formerly held, but each person in the community was to be as loyal to God as each priest was expected to be.

The new community came to be built around the four basic institutions of sabbath, sacrifice, circumcision, and Passover; at the same time the priests reserved for themselves the right to be the givers of Torah to the people. These institutions were consciously chosen by the priests. Not only was the performance of each the particular prerogative of the priestly caste; each had also been employed by the people of Israel as they had wandered in the wilderness before entering Canaan. According to the priests' understanding of the sacred history of Israel, these institutions had been responsible for preparing the wanderers for their successful return to Canaan. By emphasizing these same sturdy practices, reasoned the priests, Israel would be strengthened for its return to its homeland.

The priests' next move was to incorporate these institutions into the developing Scriptures of the exile. Just what the Scriptures consisted of by this time is impossible to say. Already the Deuteronomists had brought together all our present Old Testament from Deuteronomy through Second Kings. By this time also the JE material had been joined into one long narrative and added as a frontispiece to the Deuteronomic writings. This might have happened in the exile itself or it may have taken place between the time of Josiah's reform and the Babylonian conquest of Judah; in either event it would have occurred as part of the extensive literary activity taking place in the century after 640 B.C. when Josiah came to the throne. This newly-edited work was fit into the Deuteronomic framework, and together the two pieces recounted the life of Israel from creation until the present day.

The priests then added to this sacred history some material treasured in their priestly heritage; this emphasized the purpose that God had in mind when God established those institutions that the priests had recently reintroduced to the people. Their need was to prove that these institutions had been included in God's plan for Israel from the beginning and they accomplished this purpose with graceful skill.

They first showed how the sabbath fit in with God's plan of creation. This had already been suggested at the conclusion of the commandment concerning the sabbath, "in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day," and this became the pattern for their magnificent account of creation.

The account began with the world in chaos like the primeval chaos that the Babylonians had described in their own stories of creation. But instead of the creation of the world coming as a result of conflict between the gods as in the Babylonian myth, in the priestly account God intends God's creation to be the home of God's people and God controls light and darkness, sea and firmament, plants and vegetation, animals and humans. Then, said the priests, God, who had created everything that is and crowned it with the creation of humans, brought God's creating activity to the climax God had intended from the beginning: God gave all creation a day of rest, a period of sabbath. Practicing the sabbath was not to be considered a human-made institution; it was fundamental to the plan of God in creation.

The second priestly insertion continued the covenant between God and Noah, Genesis 9:1-17, and its point was that sacrifices were to be made even in a foreign land away from the accredited Temple. According to the story about Noah, as he debarked from the ark he made a sacrifice to God; and this was the first time in the life of humankind that it became permissible for a person to eat the flesh of animals. But there was a restriction to this: the animal eaten must be bloodless, that is, it must be meat that had been properly sacrificed by a priest. The priestly interest in the story was also enhanced in that the sacrifice made by Noah was not performed in the Temple but upon an open-air altar such as the priests were now forced to use in Babylon since they had no sanctuary of their own. As the sabbath was grounded in God's plan for humans, so was the sacrifice, and the covenant between God and Noah was a sure sign of that.

The third account had to do with circumcision, which was introduced to Israel through the covenant between God and Abraham. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations and that his descendants would be given the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. The covenant was sealed by the act of circumcision, and this became also the means of transmission of the covenant: whoever of the Jewish males were circumcised became an heir of the covenant, but if any man failed to be circumcised he thereby broke the covenant and had no claims upon the divine promises. The priestly writers plainly stated that any male who did not keep this "covenant of the flesh" was to be excluded from the community of Israel. Like sabbath and sacrifice, circumcision was not optional to Judaism but was fundamental to God's purpose for God's people.

The priestly writers also made two significant changes in the account of the covenant with Moses at Sinai. The person of Moses was transformed from being the human leader of the exodus as J pictured him to becoming a figure set apart for conversation with God alone, who, ascending the mountain, entered the clouds of Sinai and talked with God and from whom, as he descended, mere humans fled seeing the transcendent glory of God's face. The priestly writers also gave a large place in their writings to the institution of the Feast of the Passover, delineating the laws relating to the Passover meal itself and describing the way to keep the Passover. From the priestly perspective, the Feast of Passover, like the other acts described, was deeply grounded in God's plan for God's holy community and the Jew must keep this feast, as well as perform the other ritual acts, to certify his Jewishness.

The fifth set of accounts in the priestly writings had to do with the figure of Aaron. Under their hand, he became the one who carried out the orders given by God through Moses: he caused the plagues of Egypt to occur, performed sacrifices on behalf of the people and, when the people rebelled against God, it was Aaron who brought them in line and passed judgment upon them.

The fact that Aaron was given this new role was significant to the priestly cause. Wanting a meaningful role in the exodus but having none in J and E, the priests manufactured for themselves a lineage that reached back to Aaron, the brother of Miriam and Moses, and set him next to Moses as the leading figure in the rescue from Egypt. The original Aaron could make no such claim for himself. In the earliest accounts of the exodus, Aaron was considered the most distinguished elder in Israel; but in the priestly writings he became, successively, a priest, then the speaker for Moses who was tongue-tied in public, then the brother of the prophetess Miriam, then the brother and finally the elder brother of Moses, and so in this way he provided the priests with the primary role they desired in those saving events.

Aaron's new vocation also provided the priests of the exile with their desired job-description. What Aaron did in the days of the wilderness, his priestly descendants were to do in the day of exile: they performed sacrifices to bring men and women into contact with the living God, dispensed Torah to the people, passed judgment upon the behavior of persons, and could even carry out the dread punishment of excommunication. The emphasis was subtle but clear: like the institutions of sabbath, sacrifice, circumcision, and Passover, the institution of the priesthood was necessary to the community of Judah and from the beginning had been integral to God's plan for God's people.

The priestly writers handled these sources of theirs in a unique manner. Whereas the Deuteronomists spent a great deal of thought over the way they edited their material, the priestly writers simply inserted blocks of material into the documents they had received from the Deuteronomists. Theirs was a "cut and paste" operation: they respected the integrity of the sources they had received, and they inserted their additions into the text of the writing with as little damage as possible to either source.

In this way the priestly writers constructed their theological writings: beginning with Deuteronomic material, they prefaced it with the JE document. At appropriate places they inserted the writings that justified their institutions: their account of creation was placed before J's differing story, the covenants with Noah and Abraham were fit into the proper places in the lives of these men, the institution of the Passover was added to the story of the flight from Egypt, and the re-characterization of Aaron was put in wherever it was possible to do so. They also had a number of genealogies in their possession, giving the lineage of priests and hence helping them decide who was capable of filling the office, and they scattered these where needed throughout their work; and the Holiness Code, with its recurring themes of ritual and ethical laws and its exhortation to Israel to be the holy people of God, was placed in what is now Leviticus, chapters 17 through 26. By the time the priests had finished their writings, all the books of our present Old Testament from Genesis through Kings, excepting the tiny book of Ruth, were in place; and considering that the Deuteronomists had already edited the prophecies of Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah, and that the priestly writers had edited the psalms as well as the prophecy of Ezekiel, more than two-thirds of the Old Testament had been completed in the half century of Jewish exile in Babylon.

II.

The best evaluation I can give to this extensive theological work of the priestly group is to call it "the conservative revolution."

They thought of themselves as conservatives: that much is certain. Their task was that of conserving the best that their traditional ways had to offer. They wanted to conserve their traditional ritual practices, the writings of their fathers, their particular place in Jewish life, and they wanted to conserve their nation as a national and religious entity. They made no attempt to innovate at any point and they would be appalled if anyone charged them with innovation. What they were conserving, God had planned from the beginning, and they were the transmitters of those institutions and that way of life by which God had shown God's gracious care for his own.

At the same time, the effect of their work was revolutionary indeed. For the first time in recorded history, they succeeded in making religion a matter of personal choice rather than national happenstance: every Jewish man in Babylon had to decide whether to remain true to the faith of the fathers or to become Babylonianized; and every Jew and Christian even today is called upon to make a similar choice in determining his own religious faith. Beyond that, for the first time in recorded history, they were able to demonstrate that the defeat of a nation did not mean the defeat of that nation's; God: out of the experience of the exile, the God of Israel emerged as indeed God of all nations. They proved to be a vital example of a system of religious values being resurrected to new life from certain death: had Judah in Babylon gone the same route as did Israel in Assyria, the subsequent religious history of the world would have taken a drastically different direction. The revolution this priestly group set in motion was earthshaking indeed.

This is a magnificent achievement and it needs to be appreciated even today by everyone who is part of the Jewish and Christian faiths. At the same time, there were negative effects to this conservative revolution, and they need to be recognized.

The priestly revolution turned a written book into the revealed will of God and this was also a first in Israel. Up to this point, God's will for Israel had been understood as being revealed in the events of Israel's history and the prophets' interpretation of these events. To the time of exile, three events stood out in Israel's relationship with God and each event had a prophetic interpreter. God had called Israel out of Egypt, and Moses had been both the intermediary for and the interpreter of God's action. God had challenged Israel's kings, especially King Ahab, to cease from pagan practices and to remain faithful to him, and Elijah had been the agent God chose to do this. God was to punish Israel for its sins by using the Assyrian armies as the rod of God's punishment, and Amos had been the interpreter to Israel of God's action and intention. Always before in Israel, God had used events to reveal the divine will and prophets who interpreted the meaning of the events. But now the priestly writers declared that God's will could be contained in a set of writings apart from specific events in the life of the people, and Jewish and Christian faiths have had to struggle with the question that they raised.

If the will of God was set down in a mechanical way in the pages of a book, the test of faithfulness also became mechanical: does a person practice the distinctive institutions of Judaism or does he not? Such practice was necessary and creative for the situation of Judah in Babylon, but later prophets had to struggle with the mechanical nature of faith. John the Baptist was one of these. The Jewish people of his day were putting their trust in the fact that they were sons of Abraham, in other words that they had been circumcised, and therefore they were the children of promise; but John had to remind them that this was too mechanical a process on which to base their hope in God. Jesus of Nazareth had his own struggles with another of the priestly sacred institutions, the Sabbath, and he finally ended the debate by asserting that "the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." When religious faith is judged by mechanical means, the means themselves have a way of replacing the faith.

The place of "God's people" in God's scheme of things was also drastically changed by the priestly writers. For them, humankind became primarily recipients of God's favors rather than collaborators with God in his work, and this change put God's people primarily in a passive role. Perhaps the origin of this change can be found in the relationship of priest to worshipper; the worshipper was the passive participant in the sacrifices of the priest, the priest performing the action of the sacrifice and the worshipper receiving the blessing from it. The priestly writers extrapolated this into the relationship of God with humans: God is the giver of all, and humankind is the passive recipient of God's goodness. The P account of creation, when contrasted with the J account, shows what a radical change this meant for Judah. In J's account of creation, Genesis 2:4b-25, humankind is active within God's creating power. Man tills and keeps the garden, names the beasts and birds, and from him woman is created to be his equal and companion; in effect humankind is a collaborator

with God in the act of creating the lifestyle in which he lives. In P's account, Genesis 1 through 2:4a, humans are indeed the climax of creation and is called upon to have dominion over all things, but they have no real part in the creative process: God does it all for humans, and the first act humans are to perform is to "rest" on the Sabbath. What a change: from co-laborer with God to passive recipient of God's goodness. The first presupposes an active people of God willing to take responsibility for the developing of their own lifestyle; the second depicts a much more quiescent people dependent upon some outside authority for life and strength.

While the legacy of the priestly writers has adherents in both Christianity and Judaism today, Jesus himself had constantly to fight against the positions the priestly writers developed. Jesus called men and women to be stewards in God's vineyards, active caretakers of God's property who work in the interests of the invisible owner. He tried to humanize the ritual practices of later Judaism to permit their original humaneness to be apparent. And he counteracted the blind adherence to the "written word as the revealed will of God" by himself writing not a single word but by acting out God's will for his life in his ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection; and in the grand tradition of the prophets, he left us with penetrating interpretations of the actions of God of which he himself was the chief agent. Jesus understood the contribution the priestly writers made--after all, who more than Christ has sponsored the inwardness and individual nature of a person's commitment to God? --but he renovated their contribution at every important point.

What then can we say in evaluating the priest's contribution to Christian theology? This, I believe: these people looked upon themselves as religious conservatives and conservators, but God took their stance and converted it into a revolutionary movement that fit beautifully God's own purposes as this purpose was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. What God did then God does today: taking our religious feelings and our secular ones, our biblicism and our scholarship, our disobedience and our faithfulness, God purifies these by bringing them into contact with the living spirit of Jesus Christ and continues to use them for God's own good purposes.