Metaphor and Truth in Hebrews

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The image of the Church was already a complex one in the years leading up to Vatican II, whether one thinks of the picture portrayed in theological writing or of the meaning glimpsed, and perhaps apprehended, in day-to-day living, in personal prayer and in worship. But within the complexity there was in Catholic theology and practice a special stress upon the priesthood in the Church, and therefore upon the Church as a sacral, hierarchical institution, endowed with a fullness of priestly powers : of order (magisterium) and jurisdiction. This sacral-bureaucratic view came to fullest expression in Journet's *The Church of the Word Incarnate,* in which order precariously maintained a primacy of honour over jurisdiction. Bishop De Smedt took a fresh and critical look at the same image when he denounced triumphalism, clericalism and juridicism in a speech he made at the Council. Freedom and fraternity were not the only fundamental christian values to come into their own again; the stress on the living Word of God and his coming into expression in the scriptural word, and the shift towards existential modes of thinking in response to the demand of faith seeking knowledge in us and for us, in and for our time, called into question a static, clerical-priestly and authoritarian Church.

The ten years after the Council have been a testing time for us all, and not least for the priests of the Church. There has been a spate of theological writing about ministry and priesthood, verging indeed, at popular levels, on the narcissistic and obsessional. Too little of it has seen that behind the question of the ministry there stands a more fundamental, christological question about the meaning of Christ's priesthood. The more welcome, therefore, to Fr Sabourin's study of Christ's priesthood and the history that led up to it.[1]

Fr Sabourin begins his book with three chapters of comparative material : on priesthood in primitive societies, in India, Iran, Greece and Rome, and in the ancient Near Eastern societies surrounding ancient Israel. The hidden (and not so hidden) preoccupation of these chapters seems to lie in the distinction made in the foreword between the priesthood of the 'professional priest' and 'the so-called "natural priesthood", that of the heads of families or of clans, often acknowledged also in kings as "royal priesthood" ', p. ix. To this distinction we must return, since it emerges at the end of the book as a necessary part of the theological argument underlying the whole. For the

moment let us note only how it can dislocate the exposition: 'It is very likely then that the Sumerian city state dynast functioned also as supreme priest of the main deity, who was the real master of the city state. Thus could the king also claim authority over the priests of the other shrines. In the monuments of the proto-historical period the king is often represented as exercising the functions of a priest. More likely the Sumerian king did not officiate himself but patronised the cult institutions', p. 48. How did the king 'function as' (but not be) priest if he did not 'officiate'?

The heart of the book is in the final chapters, a diptych on OT priesthood (Ch. 4) and NT priesthood (Ch. 6), with a linking chapter on Jewish priesthood in the time of Jesus (Ch. 5). Again the point to keep one's eye on is the distinction between 'natural' and professional priesthood. Thus it is stated that in Israel, as in other lands, worship was offered and sacrifices made by clan chiefs and fathers of families like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Gideon and Elkanah, before ever the priesthood was established. The role of the king as leader in worship and officiant in the cult is noted, and it is stated that: 'There is an echo of ancient priest-king ideology in the features of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18) and in the oracle to the king of Ps 110: "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" ' (v. 4), p. 100. The meaning of the oracle is not explored in this chapter, but reserved for the later one on Jesus. Clearly it is of central importance for any assessment of 'priest-king' ideology; and that in turn is linked into the theological argument that runs through the book as a whole. Questions about the puzzling relationship between the apparently non-priestly tribe of Levi (Gen. 49:5-7) and the word *lewi* in connection with priestly office (Jgs. 17:7-18:31) need not concern us here, important though they are for the origins of priesthood in Israel; nor again the suggestion that Zadok was not the priest-king of Jerusalem but the leading professional priest in the sanctuary of the Canaanite god El Elyon before becoming priest of the Ark and Tent under David, p. 131f, interesting though that is as hinterland to Ps 110. This is a summary chapter which purports to describe the principal structures of the history and function of OT priesthood in themselves: the role of the (post-exilic?) high-priest in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, funda-mental for an understanding of Hebrews, is hardly mentioned, if at all.[2] But in the next chapter, on Jewish priesthood at the time of Jesus, it is stated that: 'As a cultic person the high priest performed the most meaningful rites on the great Day of Expiation' (Lev. 16), p. 162. There is mention also of his seven days of preparation for the cere-mony, spent not in his own house but in the Counsellors' Chamber of the Temple, and during which the high priest presented the daily offerings.

From this next chapter (5th) the discussion of the Messiah of Aaron or Priest-Messiah of the Qumran scrolls should be noted. The opinion that the texts speak of an 'eschatological priest who is messianic both

[2]There is no index of biblical references and the subject index appears to contain no relevant entry.

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in the sense that he will be an anointed one and in the sense that he will play a leading role in the messianic age' is taken over, p. 172 (footnote quoting J. R. Schaefer). Sabourin does not commit himself to the view that the Messiah of Aaron took a real precedence over the Messiah of Israel (or of Judah), though he quotes K. G. Kuhn in that sense with obvious interest, p. 173-4. This is of some significance as background to the very different theology of Hebrews where Jesus is of the tribe of Judah not of Levi, high-priest in heaven not on earth. The fragmentary eschatological midrash (11QMelch) examined briefly at p. 177 is also of interest, since it shows a concern with Melchizedek as an eschatological and heavenly 'redemption-figure'. But since it does not draw on Gen. 14 or Ps. 110 the contrast with Hebrews is apparent, so far as the fragments go.

The final chapter, 'Jesus the High Priest', is naturally the crucial one, and most of it is given over to the Epistle to the Hebrews. A hint at the line of interpretation to be followed occurs as early as the discussion of authorship; if the author is in some sense a Philonian his epistle differs fundamentally in outlook and thought : 'Whereas Philo . . . treats the OT allegorically, Heb interprets it with meticulous literal-ness and understands it as Messianic', p. 179, and the third 'booknote' to it, with a reference to H. Montefiore. (A 'booknote' is apparently a longer footnote printed at the back of the book.) This question of the literalness of Heb is, in my judgment, critical for an understanding of its meaning, and to this we shall have to return. It will suffice to note, for the moment, that Philonic allegory is in no way the only kind known to literary criticism and theory.

It is often difficult, when reading an exegesis of a pre-existent text, to determine when the interpreter is concerned to elucidate the meaning of the text only, and when he wishes to take over that meaning and assert it as true. Sabourin argues that for Heb., Gen. 14 and Ps. 110 speak of Melchizedek as 'a type of Christ as regards priesthood', a 'prophetic type', p. 181. That this is Sabourin's own position, that the old texts bore such a typical meaning and that the meaning is true, seems to follow from his statement : 'The apparent failure of the Levitical priesthood fulfilled in fact a divine purpose, since while it was still in full activity came the promise of the new priesthood (Gen. 16; Ps. 110) of the era of grace' (Rom. 5 :21), p. 184. When he comes to discuss directly the use of Ps. 110 in Heb., Sabourin goes further, and suggests that the king-priest spoken of in the Ps. might actually have been the Messiah, rather than David or a Davidic heir, p. 194. Either way, directly or typically, Jesus priest and king was, it seems, the meaning of the Psalm. I think it more plausible to think of that as the meaning put upon the Psalm by the author of Heb., a piece of eisegesis, though of course in the light both of OT hopes and of the fullness of the Christ-event. Biblical typology, here as so often, is not a question of the hidden christian meaning lurking in a mysterious way in OT texts because put there by God or the human author, but a matter of NT authors stamping out (*tupoô* : to stamp, to form by impress) new meanings by use of OT letters.

This is a complex matter, and Sabourin has not managed total self-consistency. If 'the Mosaic covenant, like the Aaronic priesthood, was a provisional and figurative institution', p. 205-6, nevertheless Heb. 'does not present the priesthood of Jesus nor his sacrificial liturgy as fulfilling what the old priesthood and the old liturgy would have been in figure, but as effecting true Redemption, that which the Mosaic institution was unable to procure', p. 228. When is a figure not a figure? Heb. does in fact use a whole cluster of words related to figuring, as Sabourin has noted, pp. 197-8: 'copy', 'shadow' and 'pattern', 8:5, and 'symbolic', 9:9 (RSV). Perhaps it is the word 'fulfil' that is excluded here, since he has used it previously as the translation of *teleioô,* which is not used of the fulfilment of figures or types, but of Christ's becoming High Priest and of his bringing others close to God, as the Aaronic priesthood could not, p. 191. But then the argument is intolerably compressed: some word is needed to indicate that Christ embodies the reality and takes up the place to which the OT figures and types have been made to point forward. This remains true even when one takes account, as one must, of the transcendent truth of Christ. Sabourin's statement of this is striking and unexpected: 'Christ is the only totally real priest, even the only possible priest in the full sense of the term. Christ is not a priest, He is *the* Priest, whose self-offering constitutes one Sacrifice for the redemption of the world', p. 229.

That last sentence expresses with admirable clarity the transcendent reality of Christ's person and work in a way that I would find fully acceptable if I were permitted to take 'Priest' and 'Sacrifice' as fundamental theological metaphors, as a whole range of NT scholars have done from Moffatt to Schrenk. I have elsewhere attempted to show that Christ's priesthood and sacrifice in Hebrews constitute a complex and elaborate metaphor, worked out as they are through a consistent 'allegorical' typology.[3] 'Allegorical' I defined descriptively, with the help of Barr's work on the NT readings of the OT, as a set of arbitrary, non-literal procedures through which the typical meanings are read out of (or into) the OT texts. But this kind of interpretation of Heb. is firmly set aside by Sabourin: 'It would be wrong to call the priesthood of Christ described in Heb. "allegorical", for the reason that it cannot be compared with the Aaronic institution', p. 228. Now in one sense this reason is true, since whatever the priesthood of Christ means, and whether it means it literally or metaphorically, it does of course infinitely transcend ('cannot be compared with') the limited (for Heb. spiritually ineffectual, 9:9-10) literal reality of the Aaronic priesthood. But allegory may be defined as extended metaphor (Shorter Oxford Dictionary), and in metaphor a paradoxical comparison is precisely what is established, 'a *deliberate* yoking of unlikes by an individual artificer'.[4] Sabourin's 'reason' presupposes that which he

[3] J.Smith, *A Priest for Ever.* A study of typology and eschatology in Hebrews. London, 1969.
[4] M. B. Hester, *The Meaning of Poetic Metaphor.* An analysis in the light of Wittgenstein's claim that meaning is use. The Hague, 1967, p. 27, citing O. Barfield.

intends to prove, and in any case deals only with Heb's. use of the Aaronic typology. Heb. does professedly compare Melchizedek's priesthood with Christ's (Sabourin has rejected the identification of Melchizedek with Christ in the intention of Heb., as proposed by A. T. Hanson, p. 182), and uses that comparison to show that Christ's priesthood transcends that of the Aaronites; but how will one show that this comparison is a literal one in the face of Heb. 7:3 and 9-10, and of the meaning given to Ps. 110:4?

Hester acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing between im-implicit metaphor and 'its two first cousins, metaphor in myth and "dead" metaphor in literal language' (his p. 26). I suggest that in some abstract theological discussions, and it would be a nice question to decide whether they arose before mediaeval, or even Counter-Reformation, times, Christ's 'priesthood' has become a 'dead' meta-phor. Conversely, if it could be established that Heb. is ignorant of the metaphorical nature of the language use, but this is evident to us, then this can be compared with metaphor in myth, as defined by. Hester. (I say 'compared', because Heb. is certainly not ignorant of the distinction between the self and objects, between words and their referents. Save possibly in *la pensée sauvage,* there is always tension between word and referent; the question is: what kind?) Metaphor intended as such occurs where a word (or words) is taken out of its literal context (our body of scientific or prose knowledge) to refer to something else: there is a conscious tension between vehicle and tenor, as in Hopkin's:

> 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there' (Hester, p. 25).

Hester's (preliminary) definition of poetic metaphor may well be circular (what kind of conscious tension between vehicle and tenor? a non-literal one), but will, I hope, prove adequate to the purpose.

What I hope to show from Sabourin's own book, and in particular from his interpretation of Christ's liturgical work, is that in Heb. we have just such a tension between words and their original prose con-text on the one hand, and the intended new meaning or tenor on the other, that Hester sees as the essence of metaphor.

Early christian tradition in general presents the destiny of Jesus in terms of a basic spatial metaphor: he dies outside Jerusalem, his body is placed in the garden-tomb, he is raised on the third day, on that or the fortieth day he is taken up into heaven and takes his seat at the right hand of the Father. What is distinctive about Heb. is that the whole movement is presented in liturgical form, in the form of the liturgy of the Aaronic high priest on the Day of Atonement, the one day in the year in which the high priest took the blood of sacrifice and went through the outer tent, through the inner tabernacle veil, and entered into the Holy of Holies itself. Sabourin speaks of 'our High Priest' (*sic*) *transitus* sacrifice, the one mystery perceived and formu-

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lated in its successive stages'.[5] 'Our author, theologian of the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus, quite remarkably saw in the *transitus* liturgy of the Mosaic tent a prefiguration of Christ's own passage as High Priest from the condition of the flesh to that of the spirit (*transitus internus*), from this world to the Father (*transitus externus;* cf. 4 : 14; Jn. 13 : 1)', p. 202.

The complexities of interpretation should not blind us to this basic and extended metaphor that underlies so much of Hebrews. The old high-priestly ceremonial is described as taking place in the sacred tent, as in the old texts of Exodus and Leviticus, not in the temple. Now it may be that the tent of Ex. is a tent that never was, modelled after the pattern of a later temple, whose half-size replica it is; and it may be that the ceremonial of Yom Kippur in Lev. 16 is post-exilic in date. The important point here is that they belong to a literal, prose context from which the liturgical words, sentences and paragraphs of Heb., the 'vehicle' are drawn. But the meanings, the referents, the 'tenor' are in conscious metaphorical tension with that prose context. Whether Sabourin is right in interpreting the 'greater tent' of 9 : 11 as meaning 'the new liturgy of redemption', p. 201, or not, it is clear that there is no literal, prose tent in heaven. Again, whether or no Christ is cult-minister of the sanctuary, as distinct from the true tent (the greater tent under a variant adjective), precisely because he entered it, not because he does anything extra like sprinkling blood or interceding once he gets in there, p. 203-4, cf. p. 194-5, one thing certain is that God does not dwell in a literal, prose Holy of Holies in the heavens, skin or stone, tent or temple. The 'heavenly things' that are purified by better sacrifices than the old, 9 : 23, may or may not be 'mainly, it seems, Christ's humanity', p. 191; since the corresponding 'copies of the heavenly things' were the book and the people of Ex. 24 (though Ex. does not speak of throwing blood over the book), Heb. 9 : 19, and the tent and all the vessels used in worship (though the use of blood in their consecration comes from Jewish tradition not from Ex. 40), 9 : 21, this is surely a metaphorical identification, with (heavenly) things purified as the vehicle and Christ's humanity as the tenor. The flesh of Jesus may be identified with the (heavenly) curtain, as Sabourin believes, p. 201, or with the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, 10 : 20, as Williamson thinks;[6] the identification is metaphorical, not literal, in either case.

For these reasons, and many more, I believe that Sabourin is wrong to reject an allegorical, or extendedly metaphorical, meaning for Christ's priesthood in Heb. But let us turn to his own preferred interpretation : 'For Jesus is not a priest by office, he is so by nature. And in this sense His priesthood had a certain affinity with the "natural" priesthood of king-priest Melchizedek', p. 228. This is, I think, a clear equivocation on the words 'nature' and 'natural'. Accepting for the moment the usefulness of the distinction between 'natural' and 'pro-

[5] P. 208. The standard of proof-reading is generally poor.
[6] R. Williamson, 'The eucharist and the Epistle to the Hebrews', NTS, January 1975, p. 307, citing Andriessen.

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fessional' priesthood, and suspending scruples about whether Heb. states that Jesus is priest 'by nature' alone without divine appointment through oath and oracle (metaphorically applied), 7:15-22, 5:5-6 and *passim,* this much needs saying: 'natural' priesthood of fathers of families, clan chiefs and kings is still a *conventional* priesthood finding such function as it has within the collective representations and sign-systems of linguistic men in their empirical societies (cf. e.g. Barthes's *Mythologies.* One need not swallow the Marxism to accept the sense.) But the priesthood of Christ, whether interpreted in terms of theological analogy or biblical metaphor,[7] institutes a reference from all possible literal prose priesthoods to a totally, an eschatologically, intended reality. 'Nature' here must mean the transcendent truth of God made man, which Heb. figures forth in its own distinctive fashion; the 'natural' priesthood of the old Canaanite kings of Jerusalem, as of David and his successors, is of empirical, historical and societal institution. We may have to say that man is by nature a social and linguistic animal, as he is a political one; and of God that he is his divine nature; and then fit these two affirmations into a literal, philosophical and theological analogy of 'nature'. But King Melchizedek exercised priestly functions in terms of his office as king, just as the king of Ps. 110 is given the title of *kohen* in v. 4 on the basis of his Jerusalem kingship. This has nothing to do with God made man 'by nature' priest between God and men.

In conclusion, something should be said about the importance of deciding for a literal or metaphorical meaning of Christ's priesthood in Heb. Sabourin would seem to find it basic enough when he says, speaking of the priesthood of christians in 1 Pet. 2:5: 'priesthood in the metaphorical sense has little in common with priesthood in the proper sense', p. 215. I argued in my book that a metaphorical reading of Christ's priesthood in Heb. enables one to give full value to the realised eschatology of Christ's death and exaltation in Heb. If Christ stands right outside all literal and ritual priesthoods it is easier to see how he has brought them all to an end. Here I want to make a related point: if Christ stands right outside the sphere of the sacred as a separate area within our human world it is easier to understand how he has abolished the separation between holy and profane, sacred and secular.[8] Here again Christ means freedom; the christian is one who has been set free by God and with God for man's proper work, and play, in the world.

[7]For a recent exposition and critique of St Thomas's theory of these see P. Ricoeur, *La Métaphore Vive,* Paris, 1975, pp. 344-356.
[8]See, for example, D. E. Jenkins, *The Glory of Man,* London, 1967, pp. 62-3.