

Musings Vol.1

Priests, King and Temple

~ A fallen trajectory leading to the fullness of time ~

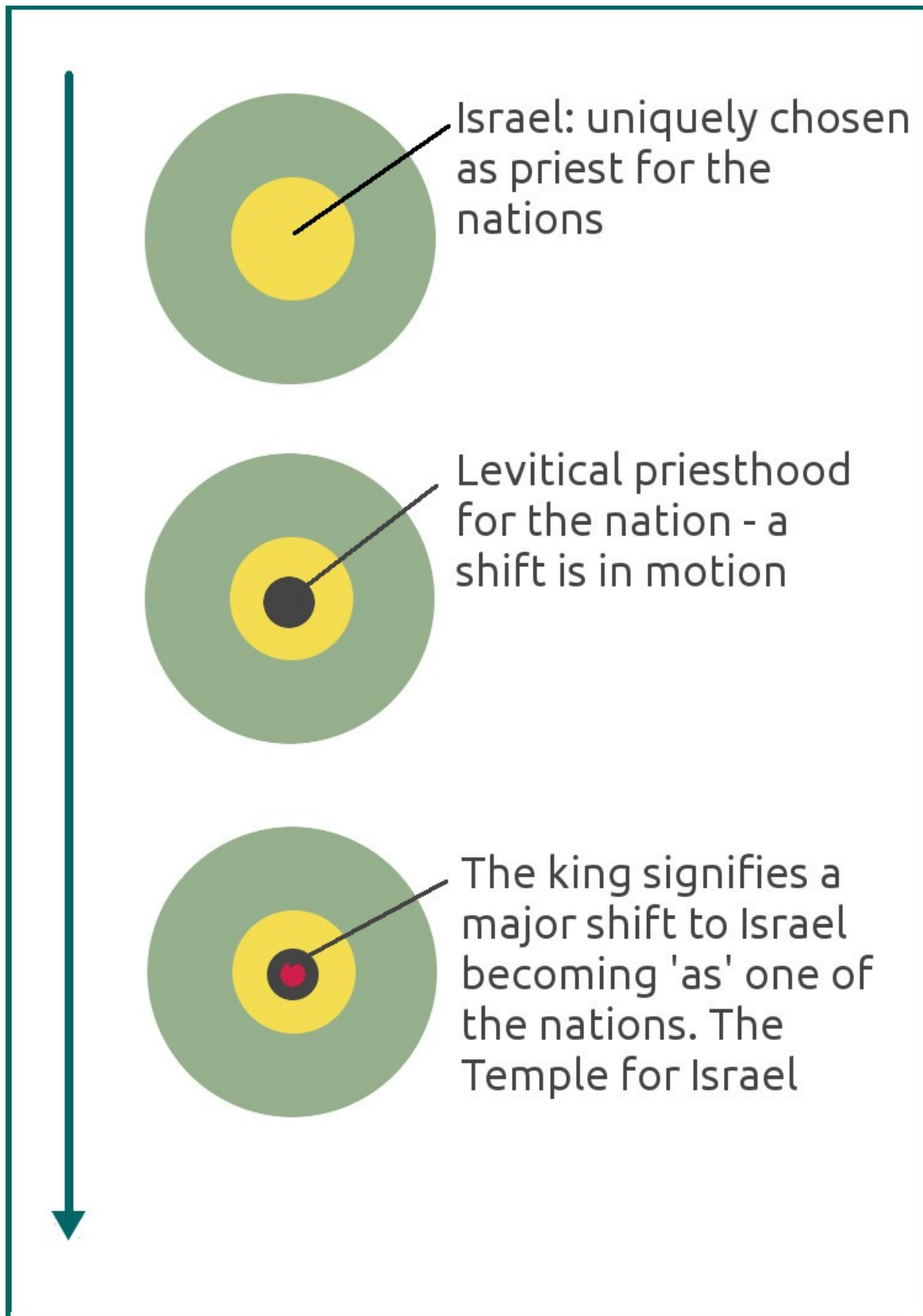
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A redemptive trajectory

As the history of Israel unfolds there is a downward trajectory that can be tracked where the nation moves away from her original God-given call. That call was in relation to the wider world and the other nations, however Israel becomes increasingly insular and separate from the nations and ironically in the process becomes more like the other nations. This trajectory 'down' or 'away' from the original purpose is one that has to be, and will be in Jesus, reversed. When we consider God as redeemer, we realise that he does not rubbish our activities but, at a price, pulls whatever can be redeemed through not only to the original point but beyond. This downward movement is along a progression:

- Israel no longer responding as a 'royal priesthood' for the whole earth, and
- this subtle shift allows seeds of desire to 'be like the nations' to develop. The result is the big picture is reduced, and a priesthood is developed that is for the nation rather than the nation acting corporately as a priest for the nations.
- this is solidified when they call for a king, which ultimately was a rejection of God not of Samuel.
- the king has in his heart to build the Temple.

This downward movement can be illustrated thus:



A few observations:

God does not disappear when Israel loses her calling, indeed his glory is even seen in the Temple when it is dedicated. This should be a challenge for us: the presence of God does not validate where he is present.

The first act of the Cross is that of tearing the Temple curtain. The Temple being the final manifestation downward it becomes also the first issue touched through the Cross to reverse the trajectory. Other 'temple-related' Scriptures also indicate that redemption has to deal with this final manifestation of the downward movement. John's words in Revelation relating to the vision of the New Jerusalem, 'I saw no temple' are very powerful. The ripped curtain signifies the end of the Temple and the beginning of a process the goal of which is the restoration of a people living as a royal priesthood among the nations and for the nations.

My suggestion will be in these musings that the gospel ('good news') is that Jesus came for the sake of the world, he then mandates his followers to be the light to the nations, thus indicating that the church has a parallel mission to that which Israel had originally received. The mandate is in relationship to, and for, the nations. The body of Christ is to be present for the sake of the world, to act as a priesthood for the nations.

A royal priesthood: the foundational calling

Israel has left Egypt and arrived at Mount Sinai where they receive the 10 words that will shape them as a nation (and these 10 words are in direct contrast to the values of Egypt). There Moses goes up the mountain to God and receives these words:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel (Exodus 19:5,6).

A very special relationship is on offer, a covenant not of equal partners, but one that has both purpose and conditions. The 'for all the earth is mine' is so key to understand the purpose of Israel. This election is to purpose, not for the damnation of others, but for their salvation.

What makes this call all the more powerful is the setting – they have been delivered from their slavery to the Empire and have been wonderfully set free with a unique identity, but the identity clearly does not make it all about them. As a priesthood they are there to offer sacrifices to God, but there is a significantly deeper role, that of intercession (and by using this word I am using it in the fuller sense of standing in a 'between' or 'on behalf of' role). Their unique identity is to position them for the well-being of the world, to make healing possible among the nations.

There are other collaborating Scriptures. If Adam is symbolic of Israel we see it there – in God's image to model a stewardship care for the garden and thus to be a light to those whose setting is in the wider context. Even if that is stretching the Adamic symbol, we have enough other Scriptures. In relation to Egypt we have the irony of Pharaoh asking that Jacob bless him (Gen. 47:7), and even the later Pharaoh who was the nemesis of Israel asks Moses to bless him as the people get ready to leave their slavery (Exod. 12:32)! The nations need Israel and need their blessing.

The original call of Abraham is set in relation to the nations for we read of the nations being blessed through Abraham. Israel cannot live in a vacuum as a chosen people, they are set within the nations as a priesthood for those other peoples. The nations themselves are a result of the fall(s) that are outlined from Gen. 3-11, and the

genesis of the chosen people (Gen. 12) in Abraham is for the implicit purpose of releasing them from curse.

We have in the Isaianic passages the servant visions that we clearly see are nation-oriented (e.g. Is. 42:6; 49:6). There we read that they are to be a 'covenant to the people' and 'a light to the nations'. The well-being of the nations are Israel's responsibility.

This implicit purpose that is present in the early Genesis chapters becomes explicit here in Exod. 19 and again in Isaiah.

If we read this as the *raison d'être* for the covenant we can then read the ongoing story of the people as falling short of that call. Even the 'high' points that are recounted from David's kingship (and a king as a high point has to also be questioned) has to be set against the effect of his son Solomon who begins the systematic enslaving of the nation. Post-Solomon the result is the split of the nation, with the king who rules over the northern kingdom (Jeroboam) coming up from Egypt to reign and erecting two golden calves (1 Kings 12). (The resonances with the former history of a people coming up from Egypt and creating a golden calf are sounding very loud when one reads of the kingdoms dividing.) Yes, the northern tribes are in rebellion against the house of David, but there is also a deep relativity that runs through it all. A 'pro-house-of-David and anti-rebellious-northern-tribes' perspective might draw the line of evil along the north / south divide, but there is something deeper going on. Those northern kingdoms might be in rebellion, but Israel, even as idealised in Judah, is also herself deeply fallen. Sadly now the nations, and even the northern kingdom are now enemies to be defeated or at least to be separate from.

The first element then of this fall was to lose sight of the corporate nature of the priesthood for the world, and to exchange that priesthood for an insular priesthood for the special nation. Rather than the nation serve the nations the priesthood will

now serve the nation. This marks the pivotal shift that drastically alters the identity of the people and inevitably reduces their vision of God's redemptive activity. This sadly marks a significant fall.

Priests, King and Temple: introduction

Central to the developed life of Israel and also to the Old Testament are the offices of priest and king and the centralised focus of worship at the Temple. There are voices that challenge those offices and institution, or, at least if not directly, as they expressed themselves, and we find those challenging voices in and through many of the prophets. There is, however, a deeper challenge that appears to be intrinsic within the OT pages that presents the the triad themselves as fallen and therefore not part of the original purpose for the 'nation' of Israel.

If, as we will seek to trace, we are looking at a trajectory that represents an increasing fallenness there are two aspects that will come out in the trajectory:

1. God does not depart from the people, or the institutions that develop. Far from this he actually appears within the offices and institution. This is not to be taken that he endorses them but his identification with the people is greater than any judgement on their fallen path. He inhabits the fallen structures and is present to redeem and bless through those structures.
2. The trajectory though continues until Israel's very real separation from its calling and destiny is at a level that can be termed 'the fullness of time'. This Pauline phrase that he uses to describe the *kairos* time of the Incarnation is a more significant theological assessment of the time of the Incarnation than simply a pragmatic one. To suggest that the 'fullness of time' is a pragmatic

comment on the ease with which the Gospel could spread through such elements as the communication system, the use of the Greek language, the so-called Pax-Romana and the like is to take the Pauline phrase and separate it from the theological context of enslavement. The fullness of time was when there was a universal enslavement, and in particular when Israel was enslaved (under a curse) the effect being that Israel had to be set free so that the promises to Abraham might come into view and find a fulfillment. The Incarnation was into that context and Paul's words are somewhat explosive:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our (variant reading 'your') hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Gal. 4: 4-7).

Paul has the language of 'we' and 'you' and when we find those pronouns within the same context they normally differentiate the Jew from the Gentile and so we find it here. (There is as I note also a variant reading of 'your' heart in verse 6.) Jesus is human but also Jewish, he is under the law with a primary purpose of redeeming the Jew. He is the Saviour of the world, but as Jewish Messiah he comes to set Israel free from her bondage as it is through the foundational Abrahamic covenant that the world will be blessed. The evidence that the Gentiles ('you') are now also heirs is not that they have submitted to any element of the Jewish law but that they have received the Spirit, and as a result they also are heirs. This becomes very explicit in Ephesians with the insistence that there is now 'one new humanity in place of the two' (Ephes. 2:15) and it is that humanity that is being built into a 'holy temple' (2:21).

Again in Galatians we read of the 'we' / 'you' issue being resolved through the death of Jesus. Paul suggests that the death of Jesus on the cross indicates that he took

on the curse of the law, thus redeeming 'us', so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:12-14).

The fullness of time then is a time in the spiritual history of Israel when there was a fullness of bondage that could be broken and a full release of the Abrahamic promises for the nations could be made available. It is this trajectory toward bondage that I wish to trace. It is not that God is absent, indeed he is found even within the bondage. This can seem ironic, but rather than understanding it as ironic we have to allow this to challenge our view of God. His presence does not equate his approval of the container in which his presence is experienced. This also suggests that we are not looking to find the total absence of God when we are talking of the bondage in Israel, but that the fallenness has reached a level where a tipping point had been reached and that the entrance of Jesus at that key moment meant the 'powers' could be exposed and dealt with in such a way that through the sacrificial death of Jesus there could be a once-for-all universal release for Israel and for the nations, along with the implication that the old divide was done away with, and Christ becoming the central focus. Those 'in Christ' being the one new humanity.

So it is to the trajectory that we want to trace, and as a summary the pathway will take us from:

- the calling of Israel to be unique among the nations **but for the nations**, as described in the term 'royal priesthood' or 'kingdom of priests'
- to the institution of the Levitical priesthood which subtly prepares the ground for a substitution in the identity of Israel. It shifts the nation from being a corporate priesthood for the nations to having a tribe of priests (Levi) for the nation herself. A shift from 'for the world' to 'for the chosen nation' is set in place with this substitution.
- to the choosing of a king so that Israel might become **as** one of the nations. Now the shift is increasing in in magnitude. So no longer for the nations, but

now Israel is all-but one of the nations. Still unique, yes, in that God does not leave her, but increasingly fallen.

- the king builds for God a Temple. With this remarkable event there is an enormous shift from the understanding of Creation as God's Temple, to a centralisation (control?) of God's presence located at the centre (holy of holies) of an institution within Israel's capital city of Jerusalem.

The Shift to the Levitical Priesthood

A central passage in understanding the role of Israel is found in Exodus 19:6 which I place in context here:

You have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession **out of all the peoples**. Indeed, **the whole earth is mine**, but you shall be for me a **priestly kingdom** and a **holy nation**. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites (Exod. 19:4-6., emphases added).

Israel's chosenness and uniqueness is underlined indicating that they are distinct from the nations. They are a nation, but not a nation as the other nations. They uniquely belong to God but this is not to mean that the other peoples are not God's - 'for the whole earth is mine'. Israel then is called to be a royal priesthood for the world and there is a downward trajectory that begins as it loses this calling when the Levitical tribe is chosen to be priests for Israel. Israel for the nations is not directly replaced by the Levitical priesthood for Israel but with this move, and what follows

from this, we can see a subtle shift in identity. Israel will become less clear in her corporate identity set within God's world and focus more on her distinct identity as the focus, and perhaps see the extent of God's activity ending at her boundaries.

We read of the choice of the Levites in Exod. 32 and the golden calf incident:

The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day." (Exod. 32:28,29.)

The violence might be (might be??!!) an issue for us but in context we have a people (Levites) who were passionate for the fulfillment of the covenant that were chosen. They were on 'the Lord's side'. (Bear in mind the contrast of the 3000 who lost their lives when Moses came down the mountain to the 3000 who found life when the Spirit came down on the Day of Pentecost is very deliberate, and highlights that the God-trajectory is from judgement to salvation.)

The shift from royal priesthood to a priestly tribe is more subtle than an immediate loss of the royal priesthood calling. In Num. 8:16-18, we read that the Levites replaced the choice of the firstborn from the people:

I have taken them for myself, in place of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the Israelites. For all the firstborn among the Israelites are mine, both human and animal. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself, but I have taken the Levites in place of all the firstborn among the Israelites.

It is not clear if the firstborn were intended to be priests within Israel and the Levites took that role, or whether it is as strong as an exchange of royal priesthood to that of

a priestly tribe. So in seeking to be fair I suggest the shift is more subtle than a blatant exchange.

Two aspects that should caution us can be noted:

- we do not need to look at things as if they are pure, in the sense of 'it has to be this way and only this way'. Compromise is part of our journey, rather than the idealism that those of us who are of a certain disposition love.
- And secondly, God goes where we go. He anoints the Levites for the task. He travels with and within the downward trajectory.

This then works in two directions, the tension of which needs to be held together: just because God's anointing is present we must not read that as an endorsement, and yet neither should we accept a compromise as an acceptable end point.

It is often subtle shifts, the acceptance of what is pragmatic, that become the doorway through which further shifts take place that are anything but subtle. I remember being present when a strong interchange between a well-known bishop and an Anabaptist took place. The bishop argued that being a member of the House of Lords was a place where there was the God-given opportunity to shape legislation, therefore a 'godly' place. The response was that if the basis of being there was unjust (read for this 'Christendom') then this could not be seen as a 'godly' place. My vote, of course, was with the Anabaptist! This illustrates the journey. Idealism (we oppose all forms of Christendom) or compromise (I can do good in that position of influence). I think the way forward is not an either / or but one of ***continual ongoing redemptive compromise*** – starting where we are but moving forward and upward in the most redemptive way possible.

The shift to the Levitical priesthood might not be a huge step, but it subtly moved the identity and calling of Israel away from being a corporate royal priesthood for all, to being a special nation whose calling separated them from the nations. Later, in Num.

35, we read that the Levites were to be dispersed throughout the land. They were not given land separate from the other tribes – maybe a picture of what could have been. Perhaps the ultimate destiny of any ‘God-people’ is to be dispersed throughout the lands as dispersal throughout is a necessary element in fulfilling a priestly call on behalf of others. This was certainly the situation post-Pentecost with believers living as aliens in the world, living among the peoples.

Give us a king

In the previous section I suggested that there was a subtle shift that took place with the setting up of the Levitical priesthood, and that subtle shifts often lead to much more substantial shifts. Although I suggest that the Levitical priesthood does indeed mark a loss of the corporate royal priesthood understanding, this is not explicit within Scripture... but when we come to the issue of kingship the shift of identity is very clear.

1 Samuel 8 is the central passage in this monarchical move. We read the following key aspects in the chapter:

- now appoint for us a king to judge us **like all the nations**.
- they have not rejected you, but **they have rejected me** from being king over them
- solemnly warn them and show them **the ways of the king** who shall reign over them.

A sobering aspect is in the choice of Saul as king. A humble man, seeking to avoid the limelight, who does not look to put himself forward. It is the people who insist on a king who will do things for them (1 Sam. 8:20). ***The corporate responsibility to be something for the nations become an exchange of that calling for a king***

who will be something for them as a nation. 'We want to be as the nations' is effectively shorthand for 'and no longer a royal priesthood', or at least it is a significant step away from that identity and calling.

Again God enters into the world of the king, and anoints Saul, David, Solomon and those who follow. As one king dies there is no discussion on 'should we really have a king to be like the other nations?'; any debate has long since gone. Now the question is not over kingship per se but simply concerning who the next king should be.

With the establishment of the monarchy Israel has moved a long way from being there for the nations, to being (as) one of the nations. God is still present, he does not disown them, but as they lose their uniqueness so they lose the focus and the ability to be a priesthood for the nations.

The king builds a Temple

The Temple in its various manifestations carried great significance for Israel. In the time of Jesus we had the Temple, though not yet complete, built by Herod the Great thus validating his claim to to be king of the Jews; the Maccabean cleansing of the Temple in 164BCE gave them a strong basis of perceived legitimacy to form the Hasmonean dynasty; the building of the second Temple post-exile signified a measure of dignity and autonomy to the people. The Temple always stood for something and in the time of Jesus, the obvious grandeur of Herod's Temple communicated something about the uniqueness of this nation, Israel, and God's promise to live with and defend this people.

The Temple, prepared for by David and constructed by his son, Solomon, was a key feature of his reign and legitimised his unique standing before God, as his 'son'. 1 Kings 8 is a chapter where we can pick up on Solomon's Temple:

There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses had placed there at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites, when they came out of the land of Egypt. And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord (1 Kings 8:9-11).

The Temple filled with the glory of God would seem to validate this move, yet even in the dedication Solomon holds on to a higher truth, 'Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!' (1 Kings 8:27). I suspect, though, that the building of the impressive Temple did not expand the vision of the people to see God as inhabiting the whole earth, but rather confirmed a perspective that he was present in Jerusalem and within the inner sanctuary of the Temple in a very intense way. The cloud of glory would even seem to endorse this viewpoint.

There is a tension within the narratives. God is present everywhere, but his intense presence is manifest within the Temple. There are continuing tensions we face. God's Temple is creation and he is depicted as seated within Creation with heaven as his throne and the earth as his footstool. In the Creation narratives humanity is placed, in line with ANE understanding of temple imagery, inside the sanctuary as the image of the invisible God. Hence God is present in all places, and yet he is found in an intensified way in specific places. Even a theology of 'home' suggests this, for we cannot impose God in all places, but we can within our own circle invite this God to take up residence with us.

The issue with the Temple was not the tension of the universal and the particular, but that the particular geo-location weakened and ultimately cancelled out the universal. Rather than the identity of Israel being located within the nations of the earth as a unique people the draw to the centre eventually resisted the push outward. Living in a strange land they were not able to sing the songs of Zion, whereas a prophet like Jeremiah who relativised the importance of the Temple provoked them to buy land and seek the welfare of the city – even the welfare of Babylon.

Reading the pages of the OT we are often left hanging in the midst of the debate, and if all we had were those pages we would find it hard to navigate to a place of clarity. It is of course to the pages of the NT that we have to come, to the ministry of the one true human, the true Israel to find how we should respond to the issues raised in the trajectory. In seeking clarity:

- we suggest that God never desired a priesthood, a monarchy, nor a temple. He did not call for these but worked with these at each step of Israel's journey.
- And yet within each of the above the presence of God is discovered. However, we cannot take that presence as endorsing the container in which he is revealed.
- Although he is revealed through, and is found within those, containers the very containers themselves also in part hide or distort the revelation.

The ultimate direction from Exodus 19 (royal priesthood) to the context we find in the opening pages of the Gospels is not one of fulfilling the calling to be a priesthood for the nations, **but of a decreased ability to do so**. The NT context has an impressive Temple with a priesthood but now one that was compromised with Rome. The compromise can be seen for what it is in John's Gospel. We read there that the chief priests claimed they had no king but the emperor (Jn. 19:15). So much for being a theocracy! (Perhaps the choosing of a king in 1 Sam. 8 over the priestly nation allowed a Caesar to reign over the world?) They also saw the death of Jesus as necessary so that they could continue to live comfortably under Rome (Jn. 1148-53).

Then over the nation is the dubious king (Herod) whose building project is the Temple. Those three elements of priest, king and temple are all still visible, yet the overall sense in the land was one of being in Exile, of being separated from their God in any real sense. The NT claim for Jesus that 'God is with us' (Emmanuel) is momentous. In the Incarnation God is returning to the land, but not as one to endorse those three elements as they existed. He narrowed the options as he made the claim that 'he was the (unique) way', and that those who spoke against what God was doing by the Spirit would find there was no other way to experience forgiveness in this life or the age to come.

There had been a downward trajectory, indeed so much so that Paul says that the death of Jesus was to break the curse on Israel. How far was this fall? For the Jew it was clear that the nations (Gentiles) were living under the curse and those nations were to find their freedom through the unique chosen nation, but now, that nation is also as one of them. Here is the deeper significance of Jesus coming in 'the fullness of time', born human, born Jewish to redeem those under the law.

Jesus came to form a people, and there could be no greater symbolic choice than to choose twelve as the foundation. Those followers asked post-resurrection, 'Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1:7) and that might have been the question provoked by their inability to envisage a future without a Temple, and maybe the question could have been framed differently. Perhaps they expected a revived Israel over the nations? Or maybe we are meant to understand the question differently and deeper along the lines of are you going to restore **the kingdom call of Israel** at this time? Thus understanding the kingdom to be a kingdom of priests not a kingdom that can rule over others. Jesus' reply is interesting as he draws together various Isaianic passages, and culminates it with the phrase 'the ends of the earth'. This last phrase surely alluding (and more than alluding) to Isaiah 49:6

Is it too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Likewise the other Scriptures alluded to in Jesus' reply of Acts 1:8 suggest that this is indeed what he is envisaging. He is not talking about a kingdom being restored as in a nation separate to the nations, but of a people who will indeed be a kingdom of priests. He tells those present that they will receive 'power from on high', the very words of Isaiah 32:15 where all will be desolate until 'a spirit from on high is poured out on us'. Then using the phrase 'witnesses' there are clear connections to Israel as the servant of the Lord (Is. 43:10,12; 44:8). Jesus rather than answer with a yes / no gives an answer to the deeper issue. This is not about giving Israel back her land with a suitable king, but rather it is of calling a people to whom he will restore the calling to be a kingdom of priests.

I end this section of the downward trajectory with Cyrus' declaration and the parallel yet deeply contrasting declaration by Jesus that we call the Great Commission. The former ends how the Hebrew scriptures were normally framed (the Law, the Prophets and the Writings). The words in Cyrus' mouth are the last words of the Writings. The Jesus declaration comes at the of the very Jewish Gospel that has a strong focus on the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Here they are:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up." (2 Chron. 36:22-23).

Jesus' words have an amazing parallel with respect to authority and commissioning, but the contrast of the task and the direction is amazing:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28: 18-20.)

The resonances are strong. The differences are clear! A downward trajectory has been what we have looked at. Now through the coming of Christ the great reversals are to begin. Temple, king and priests have to give way to the One who came, embodying those three elements, but with a different Spirit to empty them out so as the nations again might be blessed.

The Temple has to go

I have been suggesting that the downward trajectory culminates in the building of the Temple. If this is so then it should not be a great surprise that Jesus does not give the stones that made up the Temple a guarantee beyond the generation of his day. Thus far I have suggested:

- a trajectory from a loss of identity as the corporate priesthood for the nations, through the Levitical priesthood being there for the nation, to the desire for a king to be as one of the nations, and then the king finally builds a Temple.

- It is not that God is absent from among the people in that process and he makes himself manifest in the midst of those landmarks, indeed in some of the most remarkable of ways.
- Although we are not looking for some idealistic outcome there is the same calling for the church as was on Israel, that is to be a royal priesthood for the nations. And in the NT I see that trajectory reversed. The 'sacred' Temple we have to come to terms with is not sacred. The shock of that to the disciples then (and maybe also now) cannot be overstated.

The Cleansing of the Temple: John's version

John places the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of his Gospel while the Synoptic Gospels place at the end of the ministry of Jesus. For some this suggests that there were two cleansings, one at the beginning and one at the end of Jesus' ministry. I do not hold to two cleansings of the Temple but that viewpoint is incidental. I consider that John's positioning of the cleansing at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus is not making a *chronological* but a *theological* point. So first to John and the early chapters of his Gospel.

'In the beginning' (1:1) carries such a resonance to Genesis, and we have subsequent references to 'the light of the world' paralleling that of 'Let there be light' from the first creation account. The text is full of Creation symbolism, or perhaps we should say New Creation symbolism. We then have in the text a succession of days:

- 'the next day' occurs twice (1:29, 1:35): this then accounts for **3 days** of 'creation' (two 'next days, indicating two days after the opening 'in the beginning' day)
- after that disciples come and remain with Jesus 'that day' (1:39): a **fourth** day
- we then have another reference to 'the next day' (1:43): a **fifth** day

- there is **no reference to the sixth day**, the day when humanity was created – the truly human one is not created
- after that ‘week’ we then have a reference to an event that takes place ‘**on the third day**’ (2:1). This of course pushes us beyond the Creation narrative and forward to the new creation day / week inaugurated that will be inaugurated through the resurrection.

So in the above ‘days’ we have a movement in a week with a skipping over of day 6 – Jesus is not a new ‘adam’ with the breath of God in him but the word made flesh... Creation is being re-calibrated with the resurrection pre-figured in the event that takes place on the ‘third’ day (the wedding at Cana). There the **water** for the Jewish rites of purification is changed into the **wine** that can only be drunk in the new creation. This is described as the first of the signs and through which his glory was revealed (2:12).

We then have a pause and a ‘few days’ pass with the next event recorded is the Johannine account of the Temple cleansing. This is why I consider John has placed the cleansing right up front. The new creation has to cleanse the Temple, but even more than cleansing the existing Temple - the Temple itself has to give way to the Temple which is his body (2:19).

(Incidentally the next two sections are the visit of Nicodemus, a great teacher of Israel, who needs to get born again, or he will not be able to even ‘see’ the kingdom of heaven. He comes in the middle of the night. Contrast this with the Samaritan woman who Jesus meets in the middle of the day, and to whom he reveals (and she ‘sees’) as the Saviour. Ethnicity will no longer be a sufficient basis to be at the centre.)

The Temple cleansing - other accounts

The other accounts place the Temple cleansing where I consider it took place chronologically – in that final week in Jerusalem. The prophet has to die in Jerusalem – that centre is the place that has to be the focus, and we read that Jesus set his face like flint to go to Jerusalem. *Here I might sound a little controversial, but hold with it!* It is not the centre with the identity of being the holy city that is calling Jesus. He is not going to Jerusalem on pilgrimage, but going there as the place where ***the fall from redemptive calling is centred***. Break it open there and there is a break for the world. He is the Jewish Messiah, to fulfil the promises to Israel so that the call to bless the nations can be truly released. He restores this by first breaking the curse over Israel.

Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ” (Luke. 13:33-35.)

When he finally comes to Jerusalem he weeps over the city (Luke 19:41) as he only sees judgement ahead at the hands of the Romans. Having declared what he saw in the city he makes one further visit – to the Temple. He is looking for something there that is redemptive, that could even hold back judgement. However, he does not find in the Temple what might have been a slender life-line for he does not find the Temple as a house of prayer (for all nations) but as a den of robbers. With that the bondage is complete, and the tragic future of the Temple is outlined, for example Matthew 24:

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (Matt. 24:1,2)

Tragic in the eyes of his Jewish disciples, and nothing less than the end of age. Their question about the end of the age cannot be understood as a question about the ‘Second Coming’ as those asking the question could not even see the Easter events that were about to take place. We cannot take this question therefore along the lines of a standard modern-day Christian perspective concerning the ‘Second Coming’. The tragedy of the Temple destruction as seen from a pre-Easter viewpoint, would have to give way to an incredibly expansive viewpoint of a living temple where God dwells.

The Temple and the early disciples

In as much as Jesus was not anti-Temple, neither were the early disciples. They continued to gather in that setting in Acts and Paul went through purification rites within the Temple (Acts 21:26, albeit from following the advice of James). However, there were implications through the death of Jesus for the Temple. Perhaps Stephen who was associating with a more open minded synagogue (Acts 6:9) was the first one to push hard a point that he repeats in his speech (Acts 7), namely that the visitations of God were persistently outside the land of Israel. That perspective was what took him to the point he made about the Temple and where God’s dwelling place really was. The end result of challenging the legitimacy of the Temple was stoning.

There is, I consider, a clear literary twist in the Lucan account. Those who stoned Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a young man called Saul, who we read explicitly approved of the killing (Acts 8:1). We then read the accounts of Saul’s

persecution of any Jewish households that were believing Jesus to be the Messiah. The twist though is once we get into the Pauline message we realise that if ever there was a Jew who carried the mantle of Stephen it was Paul. The coats might be at his feet, but the coat of Stephen would soon be on his shoulders.

Just as we read that the cleansing of the Temple was on the third day again we will read of a 3 day incident for Saul of Tarsus. This time we read of three days of blindness. Paul, blind until he can see that the crucified Jew was crucified not for his own sins, but for the curse on the nation. Stephen had underlined a point that the glory of God was consistently revealed outside the land, likewise Paul's revelation comes not within the land but within the foreign soil of Damascus!

I consider that either the early church was ambivalent about the Temple in that it no longer carried any redemptive purpose, or as Jews they were unable to come to terms that its day was over. Whether either of the above is right or not, it seems to me that there was a growing expectation of a great and imminent shift:

In speaking of "a new covenant," he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear (Heb. 8:13).

There is no evidence in early Christian writings post-70CE of an expectation of the Temple being rebuilt. Those events were seen as the fulfillment of Jesus' words that we read as the Olivet Discourse. If the Temple was one part that contributed to the downward trajectory we should be expecting the underlining of the calling on those who follow the Messiah to be occupying the space the Temple formerly occupied, but not in the same restrictive way.

The NT understanding of the Temple

I quoted earlier by way of comparison and contrast the commissioning words of Cyrus and of Jesus. One was Jerusalem directed, the other 'all nations' focused. One gave a blessing of God's presence being with those who went to rebuild the Temple, the other the presence of Jesus (Emmanuel) with those who went to the nations. Given that Matthew is the Gospel that focuses on scriptural fulfillments I think we can understand the commission to 'disciple all nations' as restoring the Creation mandate and the Israel calling. Those who follow Jesus will become stones in this universal temple.

It is not surprising then that the term 'royal priesthood' is applied to the church. In the context of 1 Peter these words are written to the 'exiles in the Dispersion' (1:1), the ones who are scattered in an alien land. What better place to live and understand the true calling of corporate priesthood? Peter reminds them of their 'royal priesthood' in the immediate context of Jesus being the stone the builders rejected. 'Chosen people' and temple language held together in the same passage. Likewise in Revelation it is to the church(es) set in the hostility of Rome's dominion that John reminds them that they are a kingdom of priests (1:6; 5:10). Priesthood was not internal-focused but external.

Where was the focus post-destruction of the Temple in 70CE? Maybe some Jews kept a hope alive of the rebuilding of the Temple. This was probably why Bar Kochba in the second Jewish revolt of 132-135CE had coins minted with images of the Temple on it. If he was a true messiah he might indeed rebuild the Temple. But for the believers in Jesus there does not seem to be a continuing hope for its rebuilding. And given the vision of Scripture and the belief that the new Covenant had been inaugurated, indeed that the New Creation had already begun, this is no surprise. The vision of John of that final and total transformation with the descent of a cubic shaped city (which was also a bride so we must not think literal) that had no Temple in it is breathtaking. No Temple, for the whole city is a holy of holies (the only other

cube in Scripture), and the size he describes is of the then known world. The final vision is of no centralised building, no 'place' of worship, but of the awesome presence of God and the Lamb throughout all of creation.

We are those born of the Spirit and for whom all things are new, even a new Creation. The challenge to live from the future, to have our lives symbolically and practically shaped by the future, not by the past is enormous.

In the following quote I invite you to consider what church background the writer might come from:

The prohibition of Laodicea completes a critical cycle. The Lord's Supper had changed from evening meal to stylized ritual. The assembly had moved from dining room to sacred hall. Leadership had shifted from family members to special clergy. Now the original form of church was declared illegal.

The writer was Vincent Branick, a Roman Catholic writer, expressing his convictions as he looked at the development of church from the Pauline letters to the fourth century (quoted from: *The House Churches in the Writings of Paul*, 1989, p. 134). Maybe surprising that a Roman Catholic writer would pen those words, but the the quote shows how great the extent of the shift that took place over the first centuries.

I am not suggesting that the way forward is some iconoclastic movement, but I do suggest the church needs to rediscover the call to be an eschatological movement. Pragmatism is a wonderful gift, but too often what was once developed to serve a vision, starts to dictate the vision and eventually its survival becomes the vision. That I consider is the highly insightful biblical perspective of the fallen city.

The issue is not primarily over buildings – after all we normally live in one of some form or another! – but of purpose. Sociologically I consider that the early church was a movement, one that was not primarily focused on its own survival, but on the transformation of the wider setting. This is the original call on Israel, and if she were

to focus on that call they would find that God would fulfil his promise to be their Provider and their Protector. Faith was necessary to live as a royal priesthood as only faith can sustain through the inevitable sacrifice.

If I am correct in suggesting that Israel's trajectory was a fallen one, and that Jesus has come to reverse that we need to be sobered as to what extent we have embraced a 'I saw no Temple in her' perspective.

We do need to ask the hard question concerning buildings, and our names for them. These things are important as even symbolism contains power. A tendency to refer to the 'sanctuary' is to apply temple language to a building, whereas it seems that the NT reserves such language for the people who are being built together for God's dwelling place.

Church growth programs... yes all can be agreed with under the pragmatic umbrella, but we should also celebrate (or even celebrate more?) when there are those who have been blown as exiles into a new setting.

Yes there are many pragmatic tools that are so fruitful. In the suggestion that follows though there would be a challenge that could prolong the life of those tools as serving a godly purpose and not simply being served. How about once a year not simply thanking God for the tools, but addressing the tools directly? How about speaking to them and telling them that we will not serve their success, but that command them to serve the purposes of the kingdom of heaven. My experience is if we do not speak to the 'city' the city will speak to us. The city (institution / tool) is neutral but fallen so if they are not being continually redeemed, but remain unchallenged, they will revert to self-survival.

The body of Christ in all its settings is needed. But let us not sanctify it in one setting above another. The Temple is holy, and that Temple you are, said Paul.

Brief Excursus: A rebuilt Temple?

If we simply had the OT as our book we might consider a rebuilt Temple as a future vision is yet to be fulfilled. The last chapters of Ezekiel can be pulled in that direction. Not so for the community by the Dead Sea (maybe Essenes?). They were already seeing themselves as the Temple restored, positioned due east of Jerusalem where the river was going to flow from the Temple. With all their quirks they seemed to be a prophetic people anticipating a fulfillment more in line with how the NT interpreted these OT Scriptures than along some literalistic path. John in Revelation borrows very heavily from these chapters in Ezekiel, and he is free to interpret them in a non-literal way. As per the prophets of old and of today the visions are not normally fully understood by the original visionary. Maybe Ezekiel was envisaging a future day when there would be a glorious Temple in Jerusalem, but John borrowing the content of his chapters push us in a different direction all-together.

Any restoration of a temple would be a step back, the re-instituting of sacrifices would not constitute a move forward. We live post-the-sacrifice that was for all time to end all sacrifices. We live seeking to align with the corner-stone that has been laid so that in that alignment of the new humanity there might be a living temple throughout the earth. Anything less than that would be a non-fulfilment, and not in line with the 'Israel calling'.

So, no, a rebuilt temple does not get my vote!!

A temple being built?

This is the process that I consider is still taking place. Paul writing about the one new humanity:

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephes. 2:17-22).

And in 1 Corinthians again using temple-language warns us not to be divisive, and in that context suggests that the alignment with a 'king' is a major issue.

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Cor. 3: 21-23).

The NT is clear that ministry gifts are important, but the ownership by ministry gifts of the body is forbidden. There probably still is the tendency within most of us to want a king as a king will 'do things for us'. The trajectory in all its forms needs to be reversed so that there can be a corporate body that fulfills the priestly calling in relation to the nations.

Don't give us a king

At the close of the last section I suggested that there was (then and now) the possibility of 'leaders', 'apostles' being crowned as our kings. The passion of Paul was for the Temple to be free and not institutionalised. We need ministry gifts and

they will be here 'until', so we should have no expectation that they are about to disappear or that the body has no need of them. Their task and their relationship to the body of Christ is key. First they do not own, nor are they above, but they are **among**. Jesus in one of those summarising moments when there was a dispute about who was the greatest among them said:

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

"You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22: 24-30).

'I am one among you' – words on the lips of Jesus of all people. We have to understand the promise with regard to 'kingdom' in the light of this modelling. This is not a promotion to the top, for his coming was to make the high places low, and the low places to be brought up. The challenge of Scripture is we can read it almost any way we wish. That is its 'weakness', but in reality that is its strength. We can only legitimately come to Scripture through the cross. It is not that God is displayed on the cross in weakness, but that he is manifested at the cross for who he is, with the resurrection is the vindication that the way of the cross is the way to life. Laying down one's life is the way to reign. It is a kingdom of priests.

So we probably have a tendency to want a king and we simply have to refuse all coronations, and seek to resist the temptation to search for a king. We have to take responsibility ourselves.

As I close these musings I want to move in a slightly different direction. I am doing this as I see and hear of a direction being proposed that might be a move in the right direction (toward royal priesthood) or it could prove to be a place of subtle bondage.

The move is of an understanding of the church within society and the need to interact within the places of influence such as media, arts, commerce etc. That aspect is a move in the right direction and gives the ministry gifts a focus with respect to equipping. No longer equipping for the 'service' but to give 'acts of service' to the wider community and world. The package and content of this teaching comes in different guises, and we even have some speaking of there being kings (working in the marketplace) and priests (those whose focus is the church context). I consider the language highly dangerous as it seriously distorts the biblical language of 'kingdom of priests'. The language can become a means by which a wrong view of both governance and priesthood is exercised. ***The only legitimate kingdom is one of priests***, and where we began in these musings is that the exercise of gifting and calling is in relationship to seeking the well-being of the world.

A second kind of related language that, for me is highly problematic, is that of 'mountains of influence' and this can be pushed further with the need to get to the top of the mountain of influence so that we can bring change. The conviction is of a top down change. The problem, however, is not that we have the wrong Caesar in charge, it is that the very existence of empire is wrong. When the original Caesar (Tiberius) was in place and the system was locked up, a time that was the immediate precursor to the fullness of time, God did not replace Caesar with a godly one, but rather sent the word of God to an unusual character in the desert. A desert sourced movement, not a palace-centred movement was initiated.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3: 1-6)

The Lord’s movement is a movement from the wilderness not from ‘the top 3%’ of influence with the final call as all mountains are levelled is so that all flesh could see God’s salvation.

The rule of God is not based on size. He does not rule because he is bigger than all others and so can do whatever he pleases, but it is love for the other that is expressed in outpoured life that is at the centre of the Universe. We are not to be the ones taking life but the ones giving life.

I am glad for every push out the door, every encouragement to be engaged, every appeal for excellence but this has to be in the context of priesthood, of intercession in the fullest sense of that word. An intercession of standing both for the world, and in particular the oppressed, and standing between what is and what is to come (what should be).

This kind of kingdom rule is not to be measured by 'success', and certainly not by how close to the top we can get. It could well lead to a pathway of being less than applauded, of being spoken of in derisory terms, or even of being deemed to be a failure. This is why in this phase of discovering royal priesthood we have to find a deeper understanding of many basic things, that are often sadly taken as granted. For example, we will have to gain an understanding of what constitutes 'work', what the bottom line is for commerce and business, and whose voice it is that the media is meant to be communicating.

It is not enough to add the adjective 'Christian' or 'kingdom' to those activities. Adding the word 'Israel' to a people did not constitute them as 'Israel' but only opened up the ongoing debate to 'but not all Israel are Israel'. Indeed, although they held on to some religious traditions, they were substantially on the pathway to become as one of the other nations. If we are not careful we might do the same. Far from becoming a mountain of influence, we could end up contributing to the mountain of oppression. Hence we cannot consider the poles of 'kings' and 'priests' as a viable way forward, and have to critique the belief that our primary role is to change things from the top down. Of course doors of great influence can open, but the nature of the influence that is then exercised has to be in line with the Israel calling to the nations as demonstrated by Jesus.

The Jesus movement that is most certainly a political movement in the sense of a vision for the *polis* (city and this can be taken to mean society as the original setting was of the city-state) is not about creating a political party or church mountain of influence higher than all the other mountains, but of serving the wider society. It begs the question of positioning within society. Any place of influence will not be to dictate but to release what is already there of God and to hold back that which defies true justice. For this reason many times those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes will not travel to the top of the place of influence but could live out their days all-but anonymous within those places of influence.

A summary

Israel called for the world. God loves the world, he always has and always will. Love that is expressed in the Incarnation. This God does not simply appear as a human, he becomes human. Love that is displayed on the cross, the place where all oppression is both exposed and brought to death. Such love cannot die.

That call was to be the people through whom his purposes of salvation (healing) could be fulfilled. At each point of Israel's fall God went with them. Even into the Temple. Maybe there had just been enough prayers in there for the nations over centuries that the fall could be reversed, though at great cost. Perhaps the fullness of time is not just in relation to a fullness of 'fall' but in relation to sufficient cumulative orientation toward the nations from within Israel. God's redemption means that even the smallest contribution to the future is valued. Once the God-sacrifice was made the Temple is over. The curtain ripped, with the 'holy ones' not able to quickly sew it back up because of the approaching Sabbath day, everything visible for all to see. And what could they see? God is not in a house built with hands, he is in the world. For those with eyes to see they could really see the reality that the 'veil' had hidden.

Maybe we also have enough apostolic prayers that have been prayed to enable us to see an incredible recovery of the Israel calling. We certainly have a great High Priest who prayed that we would not be taken out of the world but protected while in it. Jesus came and finished the work his Father sent him to do. His work is over, but Paul says that he was completing what was lacking in the afflictions of Jesus. Jesus' work is the finished work – ours is not yet finished. We await the *Parousia*, and the *Parousia* awaits us. Thankfully every contribution, however small, can contribute to that great event.

So we look not for a temple, nor through the establishment of kings as being the way to success. That is the way of the nations. Rather we are to live as a royal priesthood living as aliens, embedded in the land, finding that although such a path provokes

afflictions to those who live in that way, that we find faith that this is indeed the God-appointed way of healing and well-being to come to the nations. And in the process that those called to be a royal priesthood discover that God promises those he sees as his 'treasured possession' to be their protector and provider.

Not all will find salvation (in the way we commonly use the word), some will resist, some will persecute, others will find well-being. Maybe at some level we also have to consider how we are going to define the content of the gospel we proclaim and embody. Here are some wonderful closing words from 1 Peter 2:9,10:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Israel-calling words now applied to the church. Will we be willing to see a reversal of the downward trajectory that seems to not simply have marked Israel's journey but ours? Why not? It is not about idealism but it is about not being willing to simply settle for a pragmatism that ends up enslaving us.