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## THE SESSION OF OUR LORD AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD.

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THE present paper is not concerned with proofs of the miraculous element of its subject and still less with philosophical discussion upon it. It simply takes the records of fact stated in the New Testament as they stand, with a view to inquiring into their implications and bearing.

The subject before us, then, is an article of the Christian Faith, which, in the belief of the present writer, does not receive due attention, and is indeed in danger of dropping out of its due place, to the injury of our teaching, which can never achieve its full results without a full-orbed presentation of all the various elements involved, as they have been delivered to us in the Scriptures.

I. The Session of our Lord Jesus Christ at the Right Hand of God held an important place in the faith of the Primitive Church. We find it in all three Creeds, in the same relative position and in almost identical language.

(1) The Apostles' Creed exhibits it thus: "He ascended into heaven. And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

The preceding and following articles are here given in this case only. They are the same in the other two Creeds.

(2) The Nicene Creed yields: "And sitteth on the right hand of the Father."

(3) The Quicumque Vult has: "He sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty."

(4) The Te Deum Laudamus, which is itself a kind of Creed, or rather, a combination of two Creeds, states it thus: "Thou sittest at the right hand of God in the Glory of the Father."

Our own National Church, jealously faithful to primitive truth, besides adopting the ancient document already cited, presents the idea of our Lord's joint reign with the Father in certain of the Collects: for example, those of the First and Third Sundays in Advent, that of the Nativity, and many more. In the magnificent hymn at the close of the Communion Service, we are taught to say, "Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us." And in the Fourth Article of Religion the Church says that Christ, with "all things appertaining to the perfection of Man's nature," "ascended into Heaven, and there sitteth."

II. In order that we may see upon what a firm basis of Holy Scripture these ancient statements rest, we turn first to St. Matthew's account of the final encounter between our Lord and the Pharisees (Chap. xxii. 41-6), in which He quoted Psalm cx. 1, "Jehovah saith unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I

make thine enemies thy footstool," His purpose being to show the pre-eminence of the Messiah above David and, by inference, to establish his Divine Sonship. It will be noted that He entirely endorses the Jewish view of the Messianic character of this Psalm,—a point of the utmost moment in prospect of the further use of it in the Epistle to the Hebrews—and also that, in so doing, He foretold His own coming exaltation to sit as King at the Right Hand, or position of honour and authority, of His Father. (Compare the parallels in St. Mark xii. 35-7; St. Luke xx. 41-4.)

The next passage we take is Acts ii. 34, in which St. Peter, in his address to the crowd of Jews on the day of Pentecost, quotes the same verse from Psalm cx., but with a different purpose. St. Peter no doubt had heard the Lord confound the Pharisees and Scribes with this quotation; he had, later, witnessed the Crucifixion; and finally, he had beheld the fact of the Ascension into Heaven. He now employs the Session of the Lord at God's right hand in order to bring home to the Jews their guilt in having crucified Him. It was at this point that their pride and obstinacy broke down. Psalm cx. 1 completed the work of conviction. The murderers of the Messiah became conscience-stricken inquirers after salvation and a mighty revival of religion was the result. We may wonder whether, in after days, when St. Peter composed his First Epistle, he was thinking of that wonderful scene in Jerusalem, when he wrote (1 Peter iii. 22), "Who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him." We may at all events recognize here, first, our Lord's exaltation after, and on account of, His sufferings; and next, His pre-eminence over angels, in which the thought resembles that of Hebrews i., where the Session of the Son at God's right hand is employed to show how greatly He was preferred before the highest of the angels, on none of whom had such an honour ever been conferred.

St. Paul has four passages in each of which there is a clear reference to Psalm cx. 1.

(1) The first is in the great Chapter on Resurrection (1 Cor. xv. 24, 25), "When he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death."

(2) The next passage is Ephesians i. 20, where St. Paul says: "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory. . . . raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule," and then adds "and [he] gave him to be head over all things to the Church, which is his body," from which we gather that Christ's People are even now in union with Him upon His heavenly throne.

(3) In Romans viii. 34, he says, "Christ Jesus . . . who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." This is important as being the only passage in the New Testament, apart from the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which any priestly function is attributed to our Lord, though neither here nor in any passage

but the Epistle to the Hebrews is He actually spoken of as a priest.

(4) In Colossians iii. 1, St. Paul bids his brethren "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God."

The Vision of our Lord in the Apocalypse agrees with the foregoing; as in Chapter i. we read of "One like unto a son of man (margin, the Son of Man), who appears in the midst of seven golden lampstands; manifestly an appearance of Christ in heaven. In Chapter iii. 21, He who has already described Himself as "The Amen, the faithful and true witness," says, "He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." With these passages compare Chapter v. 6, "I saw in the midst of the throne . . . a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain"; and also Chapter vii. 9, 10, 17, "The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne."

Now in all these passages the Session of our Lord at the Right Hand of His Father is connected with His Kingly Office. In none of them is anything said of His Priesthood, either as the antitype of the priesthood of Aaron or as in the succession of the order of Melchizedek. The only priestly function attributed to Him, as we have already seen, is that of intercession. It remained for the writer to the Hebrews to complete the argument by developing the doctrine of our Lord's Sacerdotal Office.

This he does in many passages, and especially in the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of the great Epistle, which we must now proceed, however briefly, to consider; since our Lord's Priesthood is intimately connected with His entry into Heaven upon His Ascension and His subsequent Session at God's right hand.

It must be premised that, for the purpose of this discussion, the word "priest" is not employed in its etymological sense, the sense in which it is used throughout the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal, in which it is the abbreviated form of "presbyter"; which is indeed the true and original meaning of the word. We are here employing "priest" as the translation of the Greek word *ιερεὺς* or the Latin "sacerdos," which is, in fact, an accommodated sense, there being no word in the English language implying a sacrificing priest; since our Lord's Priesthood is a *ιερωσύνη*, or "sacerdotium," because it was His function to offer a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of His People, in Heaven, in the same way that Aaron, on the annual Day of Atonement, offered an ineffectual sacrifice for the sins of the Hebrew people, and also for himself, on earth.

III. It is not possible in the present article to exhibit in detail the splendid argument in which the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews draws out the doctrine of our Lord's High Priesthood for the comfort and establishment of the tempted and wavering Hebrew believers. We must content ourselves with noting some of its leading features, and we shall see how closely connected it is with our subject, the Session of the Messiah at the Right Hand of the Father.

Now we are accustomed, and rightly so, to speak of our Lord as, in His official capacity, holding the three offices of Prophet, Priest and King.

The first of these offices, that of Prophet, He undoubtedly exercised during His earthly ministry. "The multitudes said, This is the prophet, Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee" (St. Matt. xxi. 11). Our Lord accepted the title. He could not do otherwise; for He had ever acted as the prophet and teacher of the people.

On the other hand, He was never, while on earth, spoken of as a priest, nor does it appear that it ever occurred to anyone, among either His friends or His enemies, to attribute the sacerdotal character to Him. As the writer to the Hebrews says (chap. viii. 4), "Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, seeing there are those who offer the gifts according to the law." There was no scope whatever for His priesthood on earth. Its exercise was reserved for another sphere, that of the heavenly Tabernacle.

It is true that He was regarded, in the early enthusiasm of His followers, as a King, and they were prepared to rise against the Roman power to make Him such; but we know how He treated all such attempts. "My kingdom is not of this world."

How, then, did our Lord's Sacerdotal Office develop?

The last scene of His earthly life exhibits Him as a Victim. "As a lamb that is led to the slaughter," "The lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." This is the first stage of the Divine sacrifice; the Mactation at the hand of man.

But where a victim is, there must also be a priest. If the Mactation is the first stage, the Oblation is the second. Where are we to look for the priest who could, or who did, offer this Victim to the Father? It is plain that the Aaronic priesthood could not do it. Caiaphas was high priest at the time of our Lord's death; but we can hardly look to him as capable of offering to God, on this Day of Atonement, the Infinite Victim whose precious blood availed to redeem His people from their sins.

We must transfer our thoughts to the heavenly courts. There we behold the glorious entrance of the Eternal Son in human nature upon His Ascension into Heaven. He did not take to Himself the honour of priesthood nor glorify Himself to be made a high priest (Hebrews v. 4, 5), any more than did Aaron, whose definite call to be the high priest of Israel is fully set forth in the twenty-eighth chapter of Exodus. Two utterances of His Father convey to Him His appointment to a far greater priesthood than that of Aaron. The former is, "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee," which recognizes His triumph over death (Psalm ii.); and the latter, following after and hinging upon this, "Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm cx. 4). Here, then, is our Lord's formal appointment to be the High Priest of His People. It is confirmed, as Aaron's was not, by an oath. This is one distinctive feature of our Lord's Priesthood. The other is, that it is vested in one Person, not in a succession of persons, as the Aaronic priesthood was; because this Priest "abideth for ever," and

consequently His Priesthood is intransmissible, ἀπαράβατον, as the writer to the Hebrews terms it, thus realizing to the full its Melchizedekian character, "having neither beginning of days nor end of life," but "abiding a priest continually." Here we have the complete fulfilment and realization of Psalm cx. 4, "The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek."

Our Lord, being thus formally appointed *προσαγορευθείς*, now enters upon His High Priesthood, and at once proceeds to execute its functions. Though not a priest after the order of Aaron, He fulfils the type of Aaron, but upon the infinitely higher plane of the Melchizedekian Priesthood. The Victim, slain on earth, has not yet been offered. Like Aaron on the Day of Atonement, He enters the holy of holies, not of the earthly tabernacle, but of "the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands," "through His own blood," "once for all (*ἐφάπαξ*)," "having obtained eternal redemption." This sacrifice availed, as Aaron's never could avail, to take away sin: this precious blood had power, such as the blood of bulls and goats never possessed, to cleanse the conscience; this offering, once made by our Lord on His Ascension, was once for all accepted and can never be added to, repeated or re-presented, even by Himself, seeing that He is not now standing at a heavenly altar continually offering His sacrifice, but, just because that offering has been accepted once and for all, has ceremonially taken His seat, *ἐκάθισεν*, at the Right Hand of the Father, in royal dignity and everlasting glory, "a priest upon his throne" (Zech. vi. 13).

This is perfection, *τελειωσις*, Hebrews vii. 11. This is what the Old Covenant could never give and what nothing that we on earth can do can add to, can modify, or any way whatever deal with, except to accept or reject it. The inference from the features of our Lord's Priesthood, as already stated, is glorious in the extreme. "Wherefore," says the writer, reasoning by a sure and unchallengeable deduction from the basic facts—"Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost, *εἰς τὸ παντελές*, them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews vii. 25).

Unspeakably glorious truth! The sure foundation on which we build our confidence for eternity; the unshakeable ground of the Evangelical message which we, who are in the brilliant succession of its preachers, the children of that unending stream of evangelists and pastors who have ever kept the lamp of life alight in our Church and country, and revived it when it has begun to burn dim, hold forth, and will for ever hold forth, in our pulpits and parishes, that the weary, the sinful and the sad may believe it and be glad once more.

For turn the argument the other way. If the Priesthood of Christ could be thought of as transmissible, as passing from its great holder to other men, then, since no other could possibly have the eternal character of the Melchizedekian Priest, and consequently

must be totally unable to save to the uttermost, not to say, to save in any degree whatsoever, it would follow that a sacrifice would have to be offered by each one of them, as the descendants of Aaron offered the same sacrifices year by year continually. In that case, it is plain that the comers thereto could never be made perfect; they would still have the conscience of sins, a remembrance of which would be made every time such sacrifices were offered. Priests would be compelled to stand daily at earthly altars, ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which could never take away sins, and consequently, since there would be an ever-renewed offering for sin, there could be no remission, no peace, and no boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.

To this earthly, ineffective priesthood, incapable of bringing pardon or peace, we have been invited to return. For reply, we point to Jesus, the great High Priest after a new and perfect order, Who once for all offered a prevailing and a finished sacrifice and Who now is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through Him, because He ever liveth to make intercession for them.

You cannot have it both ways. You cannot rely upon a fallible, human, dying priesthood, whose feeble and fruitless sacrifices can accomplish nothing toward the salvation of men, and at the same time enter, with a heart sprinkled from an evil conscience, through the rent veil, in full assurance of faith.

The writer calls upon the Hebrews to rest upon a finished work. It is upon the same finished work that we are called to rest to-day. Nothing remains to be done. Christ has completed the work of His Priestly Sacrifice for sin and sits, a King, in the heavenly place. By one offering He has perfected for ever them that are sanctified. Nothing is left that can keep us from Him or from our Father in Heaven. Let it be ours, in the sacred hour when we approach the Mercy Seat, to rejoice in the infinite consolation that in our Great High Priest we have all we need, and that through His bloodshedding, once for all offered in the Holy of holies, we are accepted in Him and our sins and iniquities are remembered no more.

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