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978-1-107-03907-0 - Heavenly Priesthood in the Apocalypse of Abraham

Andrei A. Orlov

Excerpt

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The *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a Jewish work composed in Palestine in the early centuries of the Common Era, strikes its readers with a panoply of sacerdotal motifs. Already the first lines of this apocalyptic work portray Abraham as a sacerdotal servant in the idolatrous cult of his father Terah. Scholars have previously noted that cultic ordinances taking place in the “house” of Terah are reminiscent of the services practiced in the Jerusalem Temple. Later, as the story develops and the polluted sanctuary is destroyed by the fire of God’s wrath, Abraham meets a heavenly instructor named Yahoel, who initiates him in the rites of celestial priestly praxis culminating in the heavenly Holy of Holies. These cultic settings once again allude to Jewish Temple rituals. By the end of the book Abraham becomes envisioned as an archetypal sacerdotalist to whom God reveals the “idea of priesthood.”

This powerful unfolding of the patriarch’s sacerdotal profile is rather unusual in comparison to biblical portrayals of Abraham, where he is never openly labeled as a priest. Still, scholars have noted in biblical materials several subtle allusions to Abraham’s possible involvement in cultic practices. One of these sacerdotal allusions is Abraham’s encounter with an enigmatic priest Melchizedek in Gen. 14. In later rabbinic materials (*Gen. Rab.* 43:6; 46:5; 55:6; *Lev. Rab.* 25:6; *Num. Rab.* 4:8; and *b. Ned.* 32b) this encounter has been often interpreted as transmission of the priestly tradition from the mysterious priest to the hero of faith. These materials view Melchizedek as Noah’s son Shem,¹ who surrenders the prominent legacy of the priestly Noachic tradition to Abraham, making him a priest.

Melchizedek’s encounter, however, is not the only instance of the patriarch’s possible sacerdotal associations in biblical sources. As Abraham’s story develops in the Bible, he is often depicted as one who

¹ On the identification of Melchizedek as Shem, see F. L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, SNTSMS 30 (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 116–19.

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brings sacrificial offerings to God. One such portrayal is found in Gen. 15, when Abraham receives sacrificial instruction from the Deity and then makes animal offerings. Later interpreters,² including a tradition found in *Jubilees* 14:9–19, often construe the patriarch's offering as a sacrifice on the altar.³

The Akedah story in Gen. 22, in which Abraham binds his son Isaac in preparation for a sacrifice, represents another portentous conceptual nexus laced with important liturgical and priestly markers. Jewish exegetes often thought that the patriarch's actions allude to his involvement in priestly praxis. For example, Philo in *De Abrahamo* 198 reflects on the priestly role of the patriarch during the Akedah encounter arguing that “here we have the most affectionate of fathers himself beginning the sacrificial rite as priest with the very best of sons for victim.”⁴ Later rabbinic traditions also interpret the event on Mount Moriah as an important testimony to Abraham's priestly credentials.⁵ Thus, both *Genesis Rabbah* 55:7⁶ and *Pesiqta Rabbati*⁷ recount that God himself affirmed Abraham's priestly status during the binding of Isaac – in one text (*Genesis Rabbah*) directly and in the other (*Pesiqta Rabbati*) through the promise.

One can see that, similar to the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, later rabbinic materials dramatically enhance the sacerdotal profile of the patriarch. What is striking is that these two interpretive streams develop the priestly profile of the patriarch in different directions. While the rabbinic tradition attempts to secure the legacy of Abraham's earthly priesthood through the sacerdotal elaboration of his encounter with Melchizedek and his binding of

² On later Jewish interpretations of Abraham sacrifices in Gen. 15, see C. T. Begg, “Rereadings of the ‘Animal Rite’ of Genesis 15 in Early Jewish Narratives,” *CBQ* 50 (1988), 36–46.

³ *Jubilees* 14:11: “He built an altar there and sacrificed all of these. He poured out their blood on the altar and divided them in the middle. He put them opposite one another, but the birds he did not divide.” J. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, 2 vols.; CSCO 510–11, *Scriptores Aethiopici* 87–8 (Louvain Peeters, 1989), 2.84.

⁴ Philo, trs. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, 10 vols., LCL (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929–64), 6.97.

⁵ For an analysis of these traditions in rabbinic and patristic literature, see E. Kessler, “The Exegetical Encounter between Greek Church Fathers and the Palestinian Rabbis,” *SP* 34 (2001), 395–412, at 404–6.

⁶ “R. Judah said: He [Abraham] said to Him: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! Can there be a sacrifice without a priest?’ ‘I have already appointed thee to be a priest,’ replied the Holy One, blessed be He: thus it is written, ‘Thou art a priest forever’ (Ps. CX, 4).” *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon, 10 vols. (London: Soncino, 1961), 1.488.

⁷ “Another comment on Moriah: Abraham said to God: ‘Master of universes, am I fit to offer Isaac up? Am I a priest? Shem is High Priest. Let him come and take Isaac for the offering.’ God replied: When thou reachest the place, I will consecrate thee and make thee a priest. Accordingly, the term Moriah suggests that Abraham was to be a substitute for Shem, his replacement.” *Pesikta Rabbati*, tr. W. G. Braude, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 2.714–15.

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Isaac, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* completely ignores these events and focuses on his early life in the house of Terah and the story of his sacrifices and trance, as described in Gen.15. Further, in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* the development of the patriarch's priestly profile appears to reach an entirely new conceptual level. Here Abraham is depicted not merely as an important link in the long chain of earthly priests but as a priest *par excellence* – a kind of sacerdotal archetype, an exemplar of heavenly sacerdotal praxis.

Why did the apocalyptic writers decide to enhance the patriarch's cultic profile in terms of heavenly priesthood? The reasons for this radical paradigm shift might be found in the peculiar circumstances of Jewish religious life at the time of the *Apocalypse of Abraham's* composition. The text was written soon after the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple amid the challenging efforts to preserve and perpetuate priestly praxis in the absence of the terrestrial sanctuary. The idea of heavenly priesthood and the celestial Temple gave the Slavonic apocalypse authors conceptual resources to maintain the sacerdotal tradition when the earthly Temple was no longer standing. This idea, of course, was not novel and was employed by various priestly groups during religious crises linked to the destruction or defilement of the Jerusalem Temple. The conceptual roots of this powerful sacerdotal alternative can be traced to some biblical materials, including the vision of the celestial Chariot in the Book of Ezekiel, where the catastrophic destruction of the terrestrial sanctuary is given meaning through the celestial sacerdotal abode. In this formative narrative, the vision of the Merkabah is surrounded by a set of distinctive cultic markers that picture the divine throne as the upper prototype of the earthly sanctuary.⁸

⁸ On heavenly Temple/heavenly priesthood traditions, see J. L. Angel, *Otherworldly and Eschatological Priesthood in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, STDJ 86 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); B. Ego, "Im Himmel wie auf Erden", WUNT 2.34 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1989); R. Elor, "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Song in the Hekhalot Literature and Its Relation to Temple Traditions," *JSQ* 4 (1997), 217–67; R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, "The Temple and the Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic," *VT* 20 (1970), 1–15; M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); C. R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature and the New Testament*, CBQMS 22 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989); J. D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *JR* 64 (1984), 275–98; J. D. Levenson, "The Jerusalem Temple in Devotional and Visionary Experience," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 32–59; C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "The Temple Within: The Embodied Divine Image and Its Worship in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Jewish and Christian Sources," *SBLSP* 37 (1998), 400–31; G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "The Apocalyptic Construction of Reality in 1 Enoch," in *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium*, ed. J. J. Collins, JSPSS 9 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 51–64; C. Rowland, "The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature," *JSJ* 10 (1979), 137–54; C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982); M. S. Smith, "Biblical and Canaanite Notes to the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice from Qumran," *RevQ* 12 (1987), 585–8.

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This idea that the earthly sanctuary serves as a replica of the heavenly one appears implicitly and explicitly in a variety of biblical texts and has its origins in early Mesopotamian traditions.⁹ There, the earthly temples are repeatedly portrayed as counterparts to the heavenly realities.¹⁰ This notion is also developed in the formative biblical revelation of the sacerdotal settings given to Moses on Mount Sinai. While recounting this sacerdotal disclosure, several important biblical passages¹¹ insist that “the earlier pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture was made after the [heavenly] pattern . . . which was shown . . . on the mountain.”¹² A passage from 1 Chr. 28:19 further affirms the idea that the plan of the earthly sanctuary came from God.¹³ Extra-biblical pseudepigraphical accounts (*The Book of the Watchers*, *Jubilees*, *Aramaic Levi Document*) and some Qumran materials (*Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, *4QInstruction*, *4QVisions of Amram*, *11QMelchizedek*) also develop the concept of the heavenly Temple and associate it with the notion of the heavenly priesthood. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* too can be seen as a specimen of this interpretive tradition. Indeed the idea of a correspondence between earthly and heavenly sacerdotal realities plays a vital role in the apocalypse when the destroyed sanctuary of Abraham’s father Terah – polluted by idolatrous worship – is juxtaposed with the true place of worship in the celestial realm. Still, the parallelism of the sanctuaries existing simultaneously in various realms receives a more dramatic and elaborate treatment in the Slavonic pseudepigraphon than in other apocalyptic writings. The cultic parallelism there seems to encompass not only the earthly and celestial Temples but also the demonic realm.

⁹ On Mesopotamian traditions of the heavenly sanctuaries, see Smith, “Biblical and Canaanite Notes.”

¹⁰ G. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 32, footnote 5.

¹¹ Cf. Ex. 25:8–9: “And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.” Ex. 25:40: “And see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.” Ex. 26:30: “Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain.” Ex. 27:8: “You shall make it hollow, with boards. They shall be made just as you were shown on the mountain.” Num. 8:4: “Now this was how the lampstand was made, out of hammered work of gold. From its base to its flowers, it was hammered work; according to the pattern that the Lord had shown Moses, so he made the lampstand.”

¹² Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 32. Beale and Ego also drew attention to the later rabbinic elaborations of this idea of correspondence between the earthly and heavenly sanctuary found in *Targum Onkelos* on 2 Chr. 6:2; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Exod. 15:17; *Num. Rab.* 4:13; 12:12; Midrash on Psalms 30:1. Cf. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 32, footnote 7; B. Ego, “*Im Himmel wie auf Erden*.”

¹³ 1 Chr. 28:19: “All this, in writing at the Lord’s direction, he made clear to me – the plan of all the works.”

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This paradoxical correspondence between divine and demonic sacerdotal realms is tied in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* to the main antagonist of the story, the fallen angel Azazel, who is portrayed as a possessor of his own “glory” or *Kavod*, a central sacerdotal symbol of the Merkabah tradition. All these developments point to the continual prevalence of cultic symbolism in the Slavonic apocalypse and its significance for the conceptual core of the text.

A close investigation of the sacerdotal symbolism, which affects so many narrative dimensions of the Slavonic apocalypse, may serve as an important key for unlocking the text’s mysteries. Some previous studies have already shown the importance of sacerdotal traditions for understanding the complex theological universe of the Slavonic apocalypse. Martha Himmelfarb’s research demonstrates the significance of the priestly traditions in the second apocalyptic part of the text, where Abraham becomes an apprentice of the heavenly high priest Yahoel who initiates him into the details of celestial priestly praxis. Himmelfarb was one of the first scholars to comment extensively on the high-priestly features of Abraham’s celestial guide, noting that Yahoel’s wardrobe has strong priestly associations.¹⁴ She also argued that the apocalypse authors envision the heavenly realm as a temple¹⁵ and that Abraham’s sacrificial routines are crucial to the heavenly priestly praxis: “Abraham sacrifices in order to ascend to heaven, then ascends by means of the sacrifice, and joins in the heavenly liturgy to protect himself during the ascent.”¹⁶ In a similar vein, April DeConick viewed Abraham’s ascent as a visitation of the heavenly Temple, noting that “although the *Apocalypse of Abraham* does not explicitly equate its seven heavens with chambers of the celestial Temple, it alludes to this.”¹⁷ Like Himmelfarb, she views Abraham’s sacrifices as part of the heavenly sacerdotal praxis, arguing “that just as priests make sacrifices on the altar outside the Jerusalem Temple, Abraham must perform sacrifices before ascending into the heaven (9–16). In addition, he must recite the proper liturgy before he is allowed access to the highest heaven.”¹⁸

Scholars have observed priestly motifs not only in the second, apocalyptic section of the text, when the patriarch ascends to the heavenly sanctuary, but also in the first, haggadic section, which depicts some members of Terah’s family as deeply involved in sacerdotal routines. Alexander Kulik

¹⁴ Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 62. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 66. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷ A. D. DeConick, “Heavenly Temple Traditions and Valentinian Worship: A Case for First-Century Christology in the Second Century,” in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, eds. C. C. Newman, J. R. Davila, G. S. Lewis; JSJSS 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 308–41 at 314–15.

¹⁸ DeConick, “Heavenly Temple Traditions and Valentinian Worship,” 314–15.

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noted that the account of rituals in the household of Terah¹⁹ is reminiscent of the order of the Second Temple daily morning *tamid* service as it is depicted in the Mishnah.²⁰

The association of sacerdotal routines in the text with a particular cultic setting or festival in the Jewish liturgical year also drew substantial scholarly attention. Ryszard Rubinkiewicz proposed that Abraham's priestly initiations could be connected with the feast of *Shavuot* or Pentecost, which commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.²¹ In support of this hypothesis, Rubinkiewicz pointed to the "Mosaic" details of Abraham's priestly initiations, including references to his forty-day fast and the naming of the place for the patriarch's sacrifices as Horeb. A substantial group of researchers speculated that the presence of cultic settings may be connected with another important liturgical marker, the Yom Kippur ordinance.²²

Recently, Daniel Harlow hypothesized that the whole conceptual framework of the text is affected with priestly concerns.²³ His research suggests that all the main characters of the story appear to be endowed with priestly credentials, including not only the positive priestly figures like Yahoel and Abraham but also the chief antagonists depicted as corrupted sacerdotal servants, who cause the pollution of heavenly and earthly sanctuaries.

All these scholarly findings call for the thorough reexamination of the sacerdotal traditions in the Slavonic apocalypse. It is possible that the

¹⁹ Already *Jubilees* 12:6 affirms Terah's priestly credentials.

²⁰ A. Kulik, "Apocalypse of Abraham. Towards the Lost Original" (Ph.D. diss.; Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000), 70.

²¹ R. Rubinkiewicz, *L'Apocalypse d'Abraham en vieux slave. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et commentaire*, ŻM 129 (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1987), 58–60.

²² C. Fletcher-Louis, "The Revelation of the Sacral Son of Man: The Genre, History of Religions Context and the Meaning of the Transfiguration," in *Auferstehung-Resurrection*, ed. F. Avemarie and H. Lichtenberger, WUNT 135 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 282); L. L. Grabbe, "The Scapegoat Tradition: A Study in Early Jewish Interpretation," *JSJ* 18 (1987), 165–79, at 167; R. Helm, "Azazel in Early Jewish Literature," *AUSS* 32 (1994), 217–26, at 223; B. Lourie, "Propitiatorium in the Apocalypse of Abraham," in *The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Slavonic Tradition: Continuity and Diversity*, ed. L. DiTommaso and C. Böttrich, TSAJ 140 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2011), 267–77; D. Stökl Ben Ezra, "Yom Kippur in the Apocalyptic Imaginaire and the Roots of Jesus' High Priesthood," in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, ed. J. Assman and G. Stroumsa, SHR 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 349–366; D. Stökl Ben Ezra, "The Biblical Yom Kippur, the Jewish Fast of the Day of Atonement and the Church Fathers," *SP* 34 (2002), 493–502; D. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century*, WUNT 163 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2003), 94.

²³ D. Harlow, "Idolatry and Alterity: Israel and the Nations in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*," in *The "Other" in Second Temple Judaism. Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*, ed. D. C. Harlow, M. Goff, K. M. Hogan, and J. S. Kaminsky (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 302–30.

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prevalence of cultic concerns may provide an essential key for understanding the theological universe of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. In this vivid priestly vision various realms appear to be viewed as sacerdotal domains with corresponding cultic celebrants – celestial, earthly, and demonic.

The importance of this threefold nature of the sacerdotal vision will be underlined in the structural organization of our investigation as we explore various aspects of the text pertaining to the various sacerdotal realms with their respective servants and sanctuaries. Since the apocalypse begins with the portrayal of the earthly sanctuary, the first chapter of our investigation will deal with these developments found in Chapters 1–8 of the text, which describe the idolatrous worship of the household of Terah. The second chapter of the book will deal with traditions of the heavenly Temple found in the second part of the apocalypse. The third chapter will investigate Abraham's vision of the infernal abode found in the last part of the Slavonic apocalypse. These revelations unveil some enigmatic traditions about the sacerdotal practices exercised by demonic creatures of the lower realm. The second part of the book, which includes Chapters 4, 5, and 6, will examine the details of the sacerdotal routines found in the apocalypse. Chapter 4 will deal with the central cultic ordinance of the story – the scapegoat ritual that receives a striking eschatological reinterpretation in the text. Chapter 5 will examine the peculiar dynamics of exaltation and denigration associated with the cultic celebrants of the sacerdotal story and their infamous antagonistic counterparts. Finally, Chapter 6 will investigate the sacerdotal dimension of the mysteries received by the seer in the upper realm.

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PART I

Sanctuaries

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