From Earthly to the Heavenly Temple.
Lines from the Bible and Qumran to Hebrews and Revelation

Torleif Elgvin

. 25, line 8 - omit the two brackets after Prov 3:32 - to make it clear which verse I am translating here. (I think I have asked for this before)

Footnote 6, on references to Aramaic Levi, should be moved to the top of p. 26, after the quote "You are near to God and near to all his holy ones."

Among the NT writings Hebrews and Revelation have a particular interest in God’s heavenly temple: We hear about sacrifice at the heavenly altar, a high priest in the image of the angelic Melchizedeq, incense rising before the heavenly throne, and angels singing and acting in God’s presence. Texts from the Old Testament and the Scrolls provide an important background for central concepts in these two writings.

Old Testament foundations

Some OT texts describe God marching forward from his holy mountain surrounded by angelic forces. According to Deut 33:2, “YHWH came from Sinai, and dawned over them from (Mount) Seir, he shone forth from Mount Paran, He came with myriads of holy ones (i.e. angels)”. Similar descriptions are found in Jud 5:4-5; Ps 68:8-9, and Hab 3:3.

The rule of thumb in the OT is that God is invisible to men. But he can make exceptions and allow men to see his throne and gaze his presence. Exod 24:9-11 preserves the memory of Moses and the elders of Israel, dining with and receiving a vision of the God, enthroned above a sapphire floor. In 1 Kings 22:19-23 we encounter the prophet Mika son of Yimla who sees into God’s presence and listens to God’s dialogue with his angels about Israel’s fate below.

OT texts describe God's change of address. He moved from Sinai and into his new dwelling at the temple in Zion. At the holy mountain his glory was revealed in thunder, smoke and blowing of the horn. In the desert his presence was seen as a pillar of smoke and light. After his ‘move’ priestly tradition remembers that God at central moments let his glory be visibly revealed in the sanctuary, probably as a shining cloud (Exod 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:10-11, cf. Exod 24:16; Isa 6:4).

In the Ancient Near East the temple could be perceived as a symbolic mountain and God’s abode. Thus, biblical authors would transfer traditions connected to the Sinai revelation to Zion and the temple, God’s elect place of dwelling. Descriptions of God at march, not from Sinai but from Zion in Ps 50:1-4 and Ps 68 (vv 17, 25-30, 36) are

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examples of this theological transfer. The hymns proclaiming ‘the Lord is King’ (Pss 93; 96–99) describe the enthroned Lord marching forth to judge his enemies and redeem his people, similar to the early descriptions of God revealing himself from Sinai. At this stage of tradition the place of God’s appearance would be Zion and the temple.

Isaiah 6 portrays the calling of Isaiah as a prophet, taking place in the sanctuary. Isaiah was probably standing in the courts of the temple when God opened his eyes. In this vision earthly and heavenly sanctuaries converge, as do priestly and prophetic tradition. The Jerusalemite Isaiah, his vision and subsequent legitimating report presuppose basic elements of the priestly tradition at home in this temple: God’s abode in the temple, the enthroned Lord surrounded by angelic beings, angelic praise, smoke filling the temple, incense altar, man’s impurity and need for cleansing and atonement, divine communication with man. According to Isaiah 6, priestly procedures go on in the heavenly temple.

In Isa 40:1–9, the prologue to the Isaianic Book of Consolation, we hear angelic voices commissioned by the God of Israel. This chapter has usually been understood as the calling of the exilic prophet Second Isaiah. Scholars such as Ulrich Berges see the speaker of Isaiah 40–55 not as an individual but as a group of levitic singers: A group that stands forth with prophetic identity and treasures both hymnic traditions from the temple and the heritage from the prophet Isaiah. Such an understanding of these texts would make Isaiah 40–55 another example of the converging of priestly and prophetic tradition. In this context it should be remembered that biblical and post-biblical sources assign the Levites a central role in temple liturgies.

According to the Priestly Source of the Pentateuch (Exod 25:9, 40), the tabernacle is built according to the ‘model’ that was shown to Moses on the mountain. For later tradition (1 Chr 28:19; Ps 11:4; Hebr 8:5; Acts 7:44) this ‘model’ is not an architectural blueprint, but refers to a vision given to Moses of the heavenly temple that serves as ‘model’ for the earthly sanctuary: For Hebrews 8:2–5 this is “the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man,” and the earthly temple is only ”a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”

The idea of the earthly temple as a counterpart to the heavenly one would enable temple singers below to see themselves in unison with angelic singers above. Since the time of Isaiah God’s people here below have been singing “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts,” tuning themselves into the heavenly song. Ps 22:4 knows that the Lord, enthroned over the cherubim in the Holy of Holies (cf. Exod 25:22), thrones over the praises of Israel. This verse demonstrates that earthly temple singers envisioned themselves in communion with angels singing before God’s throne. When the Levites were singing, their praises were elevating God’s throne, as we sing in some modern choruses.

Some second temple psalms, Ps 11:4–7; 25:14; 73:23–26, ep. Job 19:25–27; Prov 3:32 “his council is with the upright ones” (translation mine), demonstrate a charismatic piety where the singer may gaze the face of the Lord and be taken into his intimate council, the ‘council of God’ that was previously the prerogative of elect prophets (1 Kings 22:19–22; Jer 23:18, 22). These psalms suggest that Levites singing these psalms entertained a hope of visionary experience. Levenson describes the expectations of pilgrims and those seeking asylum in the temple who could be forced to stay there for years: “The apogee of the spiritual experience of the visitor to the Temple was a vision of
God ... Psalm 11 asserts a reciprocity of vision: YHWH, enthroned in His Temple, conducts a visual inspection of humanity, and those found worthy are granted a vision of his ‘face’.” The hymn concludes with the promise, “the upright shall gaze his face.” These singers would easily take the promise of Isa 33:17 to their heart, “Your eyes will see the king in his beauty.” Ps 11:4 indeed understands the temple below as an earthly antetype to a heavenly archetype. Within this concept a vision of the above for the pious one below is easily understood.

**Intertestamental and NT texts**

Priestly and levitic tradition continued to treasure the hope of divine revelation to individuals in the temple. The historian Josephus reports revelations to the high priest Jaddus at the time of Alexander the Great (Ant 11.326-8) and to the Hasmonean high priest Yohanan Hyrcanus ruling 135-105 BC (Ant 13.282-3). According to rabbinic tradition, an angel could appear to the high priest in the sanctuary during the Yom Kippur liturgy. And according to Luke, NT figures continue this tradition: the priest Zechariah encounter the angel in the temple, Simon and Anna receives revelation of the Messiah in the temple, and Stephen got a vision of the enthroned Son of Man (Luke 1:5-23; 2:25-38; Acts 7:55-56). Stephen’s vision probably took place in the meeting room of the High Council, located in the temple precincts or its immediate surroundings. The Book of Revelation reflects visionary access to the heavenly sanctuary, although in this case the seer is distanced from the earthly temple.

The priestly writings of Aramaic Levi and Jubilees (from 3rd and 2nd century, also preserved outside of Qumran) conceive of a priestly ministry in unison with the angels. In the Aramaic Levi Document 6:5, Levi, the forefather of priests and Levites, is told by Isaac, “You are near to God and near to all his holy ones.” Similarly, Jubilees 31:14 foresees Levi “serving in his temple like the angels of the presence and like the holy ones.”

Some hymns from the pre-Maccabeans temple specifically reflect the concept of a union between earthly and heavenly worshippers. In 11QPs”Hymn to the Creator God marches forth accompanied by the tumult of mighty waters (cf. Ezek 1:24), and angelic powers surround God’s throne in praise.

Great and holy are you Lord, holy among the holy ones from generation to generation. At his fore marches majesty, at his rear, the tumult of many waters. Loving kindness and truth surround his face; truth, justice and righteousness uphold his throne. He divided darkness from light, preparing the dawn with the knowledge of his heart. When all his angels saw it, they rejoiced in song—for he had shown them what they knew not: decking out the mountains with food, fine sustenance for all who live. Blessed be he who made the earth by his power, and established the world by his wisdom. By his understanding He stretched forth the heavens and brought out [the wind] from [his] trea[sure stores.]

The threefold use of ‘holy’ recalls Isa 6:3. The benediction “Blessed be he ...” shows a liturgical setting where earthly singers praise their God. The angels are described singing

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when they witnessed God’s act of creation. Our temple singers would not imagine the angels turning mute in the continuation.

Similar tunes are heard in 4Q88Apostrophe of Judah, where the singer instructs stars and angels to join the jubilation of Judah at the festivals in the temple: “Let heaven and earth give praise in unison, let all the twilight stars give praise! Rejoice, Judah, rejoice and be glad! Make your pilgrimages, fulfill your vows ... For You, O Lord, are eternal.] Your glory endures forever.”

The sabbath liturgy contained in the presectarian Words of the Luminaries echoes Ezekiel and the threefold ‘holy’ from Isaiah 6 in its vision of heaven and earth praising the Creator (4Q504 1-2 vii). In the preserved text the word ‘holy’ occurs twice, a third can be emended:

Give thanks ... to his holy name forever ... all the angels of the holy firmament, [from down below up] to the heavens, the earth and all its schemers, [praise his holy name, yeah, even the] great [abyss], Abaddon, the waters and all that is [in them, praise him] always[, the earth with] all its creatures, forever.

Among those participating in the choir are angels of the holy firmament, a term echoing Ezekiel’s throne vision (1:22-26) and perhaps alluding to Exod 24:9-11. Words of the Luminaries’ links with later synagogue liturgy suggest a common Israelite setting for these daily prayers, the most logical one would be levitic liturgy in the temple.

In the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, found in eight copies in Qumran and Masada, the earthly conductor directs the praises of the angels. At times he asks the earthly singers to join (4Q403 1 i 36-37): “Rejoice, you who exult in [knowing him, with] a song of rejoicing among the wondrous godlike angels. Exalt his glory with the tongue of all who exalt His wondrous knowledge, with the mouth of all who chant [to Him.” These songs may have their origin in the levitic choir of the pre-Maccabean temple, and demonstrates how the singing levites saw themselves on-line with the angelic choir above. God is indeed “enthroned over the praises of Israel.”

I now turn to a non-hymnic composition, a presectarian ‘testament of Levi’ in Aramaic from the early 2nd century BC. 4Q541 frg. 9 portrays an end-time priest whose teaching and words are like the words of heaven. Tested through trials, his teaching and sacrificial ministry will lead to a renewal of the world:

He will transmit [to the]m his [w]isdom. And he shall make atonement for all those of his generation, and he shall be sent to all the children of his people. His words are like the words of heaven, and his teaching is like the will of God. Then the sun everlasting will shine and its fire will give warmth unto the ends of the earth. It will shine on darkness; then darkness will vanish from the earth, and mist from the dry land.

Although this priest is earthly, his ministry gives resonance in the heavenly realms. Such a description suggests a relation to priestly circles that conceived of the officiating temple priest as being linked to and on-line with the heavenly temple and the angels serving above.
A connected tradition, evidenced in the Greek Testament of Levi 3:4-6; 5:1-2; 8:18-19 and Aramaic Levi 4:4-13 refers to the ascent of Levi to the heavenly realms. A central blessing from the Qumran community refer to the officiating high priest standing in the midst of angels in the heavenly sanctuary (1QSb III-IV).

May the Lord bless you and set you, perfected in honor, in the midst of the holy angels; [may he re]new for you the [eternal] covenant of the priesthood. May he make a place for you in the holy [habitation.] May he ju[dge all princes by the measure of your works, all [leaders] of the nations by what you say. He has justified you from all [defilement,] chosen you and placed you at the head of the holy angels ... May you [abide forever] as an angel of the presence in the holy habitation, to the glory of the God of host[s. May you] serve in the temple of the kingdom of God, ordering destiny with the angels of the presence, a Council of the Community [with the holy angels] forever, for all the ages of eternity! ... May he establish you as holy among his people, as the ’greater [light’ (Gen 1:16) to illumine] the world with knowledge, and to shine upon the face of many [with wisdom leading to life.

A related rabbinic tradition judges the officiating high priest as more important than the angels: according to the Jerusalem Talmud (Yoma 5.2), neither angels nor the son of man are present in the Tent of Meeting on Yom Kippur, only the high priest and God. The two lasts texts quoted above provided the matrix that enabled a sectarian author to coin the ‘Self-Glorification Hymn’ on the messianic high priest, modelled upon the Teacher of Righteousness, the priest who founded the Community. This hymn, here quoted from 4Q491, exists in two versions and was included in the Thanksgiving Hymns of the Community.

God has given me] a mighty throne in the congregation of the angels. None of the ancient kings shall sit on it, and their nobles [shall not[ be there.] There are no]ne comparable [to me in] my glory, no one shall be exalted besides me; none shall come against me. For I have dwelt on[ high, and resided] in the heavens ... I am reckoned with the angels and my abode is in the holy assembly. ... Wh[o] has experienced contempt like me? Who is comparable to me in my glory? ... Who has borne troubles like me? And who like me [has refrain]ed from evil? I have never been taught, but no teaching compares [with mine.] Who then shall assault me when [I] open[ my mouth?] Who can endure the utterance of my lips? Who shall challenge me and compare with my judgment? For I am reckoned with the angels, [and] my glory with that of the sons of the King.

**Heavenly temple and Christology in Hebrews**

These priestly texts provide a living background for the Christology of Hebrews. This Jewish Christian author knows other NT writings who testify to Jesus as messianic prophet and royal messiah, as the Wisdom of God who speaks with the Lord’s own authority, and as the Suffering Servant. In the choir of early Christian voices that give expression to the meaning and importance of Jesus’ ministry he wants to add one central
element from his treasured tradition: that the high priest has a dual ministry, earthly and at the same time officiating in the heavenly sanctuary. He wants to supplement the words about the “Son of Man as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45), the blood of Jesus “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28), and Paul’s words of Christ as a “sacrifice of atonement” (Rom 3:25). Drawing on his priestly and levitic heritage the author of Hebrews describes Jesus as the ultimate high priest, who sacrificed himself on Golgotha, which takes the place of the earthly temple. But at the same time Jesus is officiating in the real and heavenly sanctuary, before the throne of God.

According to Hebrews 4:10, 6:20, Jesus has “become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedeq,” fulfilling the messianic promise of Ps 110:4. Three texts from Qumran cast new light on the figure of Melchizedeq and Hebrews’ argument and exegesis. 4QVisions of Amram, a priestly writing in Aramaic from the early 2nd century BC, describe the prince of light and the prince of darkness, the two angelic powers who rule over men. The prince of darkness is named Melchiresh’a (‘My King is evil’). The name of his counterpart is not preserved in the six fragmentary copies of this work, but he was no doubt called Melchi-zedeq (‘My King is righteousness’). This angelic ruler of the sons of light is divine (perhaps not in the Nicean sense of the word), he brings healing and saves men from the power of death. As leader of God’s heavenly army he takes on the role that other texts ascribe to the archangel Michael.

In a fragmentary context in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice one of the angels is referred to as “...zedeq, priest in the assembl[ly of God” (4Q401 11 3). We may with confidence restore the name of the angel as Melchi]zedeq. These liturgical songs thus conceive of Melchizedeq as an angel with a priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, perhaps as a counterpart to the service of priests in the earthly temple.

From Cave 11 comes the ‘Melchizedeq text,’ a biblical commentary on the year of jubilee and God’s forthcoming redemption of his people. In this text Melchizedeq is an angelic redeemer who leads the battle against the evil powers. “He shall atone for all the Sons of [Light] ... and release th[em from the debt of a]ll their sins ... he will deliver all the captives from the power of B]elial.” It is he who is spoken of in Isa 52:7, “Your God reigns,” he is the God who “holds judgement among the godlike ones” (Ps 82:1). ”The year of God’s favour” (Isa 61:2) is here rendered as “the year of Melchiz[edek]’s favor” (11Q13 2 i 8-16).

The first two writings come from a wider priestly tradition in Judea, the third was probably authored in the priestly led Qumran community early in the 1st century BC. Together they testify to the concept of an angelic Melchizedeq, priest and prince in God’s assembly. A similar picture of Melchizedeq emerges in 2 Enoch, a Jewish apocalypse from the 1st century AD, preserved in Slavonic. The idea of a heavenly Melchizedeq probably crystallized in priestly exegesis of Genesis 14 and Ps 110:4. The names of Abraham’s antagonists were read symbolically: The king of Gomorra is Birsha (‘Son of Wickedness’), while the king of Sodom is Bera (‘son of Evil’). We may speculate if these priests read Genesis 14 as referring to an earthly visit of the angelic Melchizedeq, who helped Abraham in his fight against the evil powers.

How is Melchizedeq described in Hebrews? He is “without father or mother ... without beginning of days and end of life, like the Son of God he remains priest forever.” In contrast to earthly priests who die he is “declared to be living” (7:3, 8). Jesus appears
as priest like Melchizedeq not because of his ancestry (he was not of the tribe of Levi) but “on the power of an indestructable life” (7:15-16).

When we recognize the thoroughly priestly character of Hebrews it is hard to escape the conclusion that this author shares a similar image of Melchizedeq as that evolving from 2 Enoch and the Qumran writings discussed above. Our author is a priest or Levite who reinterpreted the Melchizedeq tradition in light of the Jesus event: Melchizedeq prefigures the priestly ministry of Jesus who brought himself forth as a sacrifice on the cross and at the same time in the heavenly sanctuary, “he entered heaven itself to appear for us in God’s presence” (9:24). In contrast to Pharisaic theology this author subscribed to a priestly, perhaps Sadducean, axiom, based on Leviticus and temple tradition: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (9:22). If Hebrews read Genesis 14 as referring to an earthly visit of the heavenly Melchizedeq, he also would appear as a biblical foreshadow of the incarnation of Christ, who “for a little while was made lower than the angels” (2:7-9).

We have surveyed Qumran texts that prefigure NT motifs and that easily could be interpreted as prophecies of Jesus. In my understanding these texts and their authors could have been used by God to prepare his people for the ‘fulness of time.’

Not only priests and Levites are connected with the angelic assembly, this is true for the whole congregation: “You have come to the heavenly Jerusalem ... to thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven” (12:22-23). Through Christ’s sacrifice every believer now has access through the veil (of the Holy of Holies) and into God’s presence (6:19; 10:20), a privilege previous accessible only to the high priest on the Day of Atonement.

Such a ‘democratisation’ of priestly privileges had a precursor in the Community that produced the Qumran writings. The Qumran Community regarded the physical temple as polluted. Therefore angelic liturgies had to be sung outside the Jerusalem temple to secure pure liturgical partners for the angels. This Community conceived of itself as a spiritual temple with its members in liturgical communion with the heavenly sanctuary and the officiating angels. The singers therefore saw themselves as successors of purified priests and Levites in sacrificial and liturgical temple service. In the liturgical celebration of the Community lay Israelites had access to a mystical experience previously cherished by temple priests and Levites. A member’s identification with the praying ‘I’ in the Thanksgiving Hymns would give the faithful access to the source of mystical revelation and communion with God. According to these hymns, the purified one “can take his stand in Your presence with the perpetual host and the spirits ... in a jubilating union” (XIX 16-17). As part of the community where praise and supplication rose like incense before the heavenly throne as a “sacrifice of thanksgiving” (4Q174 I 7), the non-priestly member was transformed to some kind of priestly status. This spiritual renewal would be seen as a sign of the community of the end-times (Joel 3:1-5, cf. Num 11:25; Acts 2:14-36).

The mystical prayer and praise of this Community may be seen as a precursor of the Pharisees’ and early Jewish Christians’ realization of the idea of a ‘kingdom of priests,’ cf. Exod 19:6; Isa 61:6; 1 Pet 2:5; Eph 2:21-22. Rev 1:6; 5:8,12.

Temple and priesthood in Revelation
In contrast to the priestly-led Qumran Community, for Revelation the new community of the Messiah realizes the priesthood of all believers. Different from Qumran, a leadership by priests or Levites is not needed to establish the new priestly ministry. The introductory greeting states that Christ by his blood “has made us a kingdom, priests for God his father” (1:6). 5:10 recalls this proclamation; Christ has “made them a kingdom, priests to God,” and adds that the priestly believers shall “rule on the earth,” a promise that will be realized in the millennium: “They shall be priests with him and rule with him for 1000 years” (20:6).

The vision of the multitude in 7:9-17 may be interpreted as a description of the full community of believers partaking in the heavenly worship. This multitude serves God night and day in his temple, similar to the ministry of levitic singers who served God in praise day and night in the temple (Ps 134; 135:1-2).

Rev 5:8 and 8:3f describe the prayers of the holy ones (viz. the believers on earth) as incense rising before God’s heavenly throne, conveyed through the censers of heavenly beings. The priests’ offering of incense before the veil to the Holy of Holies is a colourful image of second temple Judaism. The silence in heaven (8:1) signifies the time during which the angel burns the incense on the altar to accompany the prayers of the saints. The same thought is found in rabbinic tradition: when Israel comes to pray, the angels are silent. The temple is the starting point both for John and the rabbis: during the morning and evening service of the temple incense was burned while the community (as well as Jews elsewhere in the land) was praying outside the temple (Exod 30:1-10; Judith 9:1; Luke 1:10; Acts 3:1). The ascending smoke of incense was seen as symbolizing and assisting the ascent of prayers to God in heaven. The association of prayer with incense goes back to OT times, cf. Ps 141:2 “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,” and continues in Revelation and Hebrews, cf. Hebr 13:15 “Let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.”

Revelation chs. 5 and 8 show an intimate relation between the believers’ praise and prayers and the burning of incense in the heavenly temple. The believers’ priestly ministry is connected with the heavenly realms both in John’s apocalypse and Hebrews (Hebr 4:14-16; 9:11-12; 10:19-22). The angelic hymns in chs. 4–5 were likely used in earthly liturgies in Asia Minor, perhaps before John’s experience and certainly thereafter. Therefore there is already now a union between the heavenly and earthly singers. If John came from a levitic background and was at home in the temple watches where God’s servants praised him night and day, it is easy to understand that he conceives of an unending priestly ministry with the prayers of the church steadily rising in the heavenly sanctuary.

John’s description of angelic priestly ministry is indebted to Jewish tradition treasured by Levites and priests. The angels’ priestly ministry is elaborated in the visions of the sanctuary in chs. 4–5 and 8:1-4. Further, angels come out from the altar before they are sent out to minister on earth (8:5; 14:18; 16:7; cf. 9:13). The image of angels being sent out from the altar can owe their inspiration to the levitic temple guard, which under the command of the high priest’s deputy was responsible for checking the inventory of the temple and guarding the temple precincts. The line of deduction would thus be ‘as on earth so also in heaven.’

In 7:3 and 9:4 God’s servants on earth are sealed with the name of the Lamb on their foreheads (cf. 14:1; Ezek 9:4). This feature may be connected to their priestly
ministry. In the ancient Near East priests could be marked with the name of their God on their foreheads, cf. the inscription over Aaron’s forehead, ‘Sanctified to the Lord,’ Exod 28:36-37. Houses or sanctuaries could be dedicated through an inscription on the doorpost to the king or the godhead. The believers, who openly before the eyes of the world are sanctified to the Lamb, are thus fulfilling Deut 6:8, where the words of God on the foreheads realize the priestly prerogative of every Israelite male in the time of the Babylonian exile, a time without temple. 22:3f describes the ultimate service before God’s throne where the elect serve God with his name on their foreheads, not any more the name of the Lamb – as there is no more need for the open witness to the Lamb before the world.

Similar to Paul’s writings, the believers on earth are designated ‘the saints,’ ‘the holy ones’ (5:8; 8:3; 11:8 etc.). In the OT and intertestamental literature ‘holy ones’ regularly refers to angels. But in some text this usage is extended to those elect and sanctified. Some Qumran texts use ‘the holy ones’ or similar expressions about the end-time community or the priests. As all priestly service was sanctified to God, the particular use of ‘holy ones’ within the early Christian community may be explained through an eschatological democratisation of priestly prerogatives to all believers.

In 15:2-4 the victorious ones are portrayed standing on the sea of glass and fire, singing with harps. The sea of glass and fire is reminiscent of the firmament below God’s throne in Exod 24:9-11 and Ezek 1:24. But the designation ‘sea’ also recalls the ‘sea’ for purification purposes in the Jerusalem temple, 1 Kgs 7:23-25, 39, 44. The victorious ones of Rev 15:1-4 are those who have purified themselves by the blood of the Lamb. So this passage merges traditions of visions of the divine throne with the concept of purification, both central elements of the temple tradition.

Revelation is permeated by temple symbolism more than any other 1st century Jewish writing. The promise that the faithful will become a pillar in God’s temple (3:12, cf. 1 Kgs 7:21; Isa 22:15) can be compared to the thresholds of the temple that partake in the praise of the King in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (4Q403 1 i 41). The believer portrayed as a temple pillar may be a derivation of the community seen as a spiritual temple, a concept well known from the Qumran Community that recurs in NT epistles (1QS VII 5-10; 4Q174 1-3 i 6-7; 1 Pet 2:5-10; Eph 2:20-22).

In 4:1 and 11:19 God’s temple in heaven is opened, cf. the opened door before the believer in 3:20. The opening of the door to the sanctuary was a well-known image in the ancient world. Of particular importance is the rabbinic tradition that the doors of the temple were opened forty years before its destruction, so that rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai had to reproach them (Talmud Yoma 39b, cf. a similar incident reported by Josephus, Wars 6.293-4). In all three texts the opening of the doors is related to end-time judgement. Hebrews uses related, but different terminology - the way through the curtain to the inner sanctum has been opened by Christ himself (6:19; 4:14-16), cf. the tearing of the veil in Matt 27:51.

The seer notes that there is still a covenantal ark in the heavenly sanctuary (11:19). As long as the holy ones on earth lift up their prayers as incense rising before God’s throne, there must be a sanctuary above with an altar (6:9; 8:3; 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7). But in the end there is no temple, only God’s throne (20:11), a temple source (22:1f), and God’s city, the new Jerusalem. God the Almighty and the Lamb are their temple (21:22f). Jer 3:16-17 may play behind chs. 21–22 as a proof text: This passage on
the restoration of Israel describes Jerusalem, gentiles coming to Zion, the Lord’s throne, but no ark of the covenant. In its description of the end-time Zion without a temple Revelation differs from other Jewish groups who expected a restored temple in the end-times.3

In 15:5-8 the heavenly temple is opened and the temple filled with smoke of God’s glory and power. Here again we encounter priestly terminology, albeit belonging to the all-Israelite scriptures. There are a number of parallels between Revelation 1–8 and the daily temple sacrifices described in Mishna Tamid. Knowledge of such procedures was the propriety of priests and levites.

In 7:17; 21:6, and 22:1f we encounter the temple source with living water, running water. The image of the temple source with paradisiac connotations goes all through the Hebrew Bible, cf. Gen 2:10-14; Ps 46:5; Ezek 47:1-12; Joel 4:18; Zech13:1; 14:6, and is often connected to end-time scenarios. In Qumran this tradition often recurs in the Thanksgiving Hymns and 4QInstruction. Both writings testify that the ‘opened fountain’ of Zech 13:1 is a reality in the community of the end-time (4Q418 81 1, 12; 1QHa IX 4; X 18; XIII 10, 12, 13; XIV 17-18; XVI 8; XVIII 31, cf. Sir 24:23-33).

In 7:15 God will raise his dwelling over the martyrs. The biblical background of this image may be found e.g. in Isa 4:5f, a promise that God will spread over Zion a cover. But we also recall Ps 84 of the levitic sons of Korah, who long to dwell in the temple and gaze upon God in its precincts (cf. Ps 11:4-7).

Revelation’s war ideology

Revelation recasts Jewish eschatological tradition on the militant Messiah and his army. In the lion-like lamb and his followers these hopes are transformed and fulfilled through the sacrificial death of the lamb. The 144.000 of 7:3-8; 14:1-5 represent the end-time army of this Messiah, those who are following him faithfully, even unto death. Revelation uses holy war language while transferring it to non-military means of triumph over evil.

The concept of war in heaven with repercussions on earth has parallels in the early 4QVisions of Amram (ca 200 – 150 BC) and the later 11QMelchizedeq, both preserving priestly traditions with dualistic features. Here we encounter Melchizedeq as the end-time judge of Belial and his army. And he will redeem those belonging to him in the great year of jubilee and freedom. The parallels to the ruling Lamb as well the rider on the white horse (19:11-21) are many. Both Hebrews and John the seer are indebted to priestly traditions on Melchizedeq as God’s vigilant viceroy.

These two texts and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice illuminate Revelation’s royal terminology, where both God and Christ are designated with royal titles. In 11:14-19 God himself has taken on kingship, cf. the recurring image of God as King in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. In 1:5 Jesus is Lord over the kings of the earth, and in 19:16 he is proclaimed ‘King of Kings and Lord of Lords.’ Those who belong to him have themselves been made royal priests.

3 The only exception is the contemporary apocalypse 4 Ezra, which does not mention any temple in the messianic millennium (7:26-28), only the Torah will abide forever (9:31-37).
Another feature of the book’s war ideology is the conviction that the priestly believers shall ‘rule the earth’ or ‘rule the land.’ The declaration of the believers as royal priests in the introduction (1:6) probably refers to believers who shall rule the land, as is explicitly stated in 5:10. In the letter to Laodicea the victorious believer shall sit with the Lord on his throne (3:21), and in the letter to Thyatira the victorious one will rule the gentiles with an iron rod (2:26f), similar to the description of the end-time Messiah in the main part of the book (12:5; 19:15f). As the enthroned Messiah shall rule by an iron rod, so shall his church. These verses should be interpreted in connection with the millennium of ch. 20, a limited time where the Messiah rules on earth together with the faithful: “They shall be priests with him and rule with him for 1000 years” (20:6).

The concepts of royal believers ruling the land may be indebted to the painful loss of the land of Judea in the years 67-70, a close memory of John the seer. Further, ‘priests ruling the land’ would for a Jewish reader recall the rule of the Hasmonean (Maccabean) high priests 164-38 BC. 4QApocryphon of Jeremiah C describes three bad priests that did not walk on God’s ways (4Q387 3 4), probably Jason, Menelaus, and Alcimus, during the years 174-169 BC. These three priests as well as the Hasmoneans could be anti-types for the end-time priests who shall rule in the name of the Lamb-like Messiah. The loss of the land in the great revolt as well as the OT background suggest that we should first read these passages as ‘ruling the land,’ and only secondarily as ‘ruling the earth.’ The wider universal dimension could indicate that John the seer’s eschatology developed during the decades following the great revolt.

Jerusalem still occupies a central role for the author. Towards the end of the millennium Satan and his earthly allies will encircle the ‘beloved city’ of Jerusalem (20:9). This city is also called ‘the camp of the holy ones,’ recalling the Qumran designations ‘the congregation of Jerusalem’ and ‘Jerusalem, who is the holy camp’ and ‘capital of the camps of Israel’ (War Scroll III 11; 4QMMT B 60-62). Chs. 21–22 perceives the eschatological fulfilment as Jerusalem created anew. A similar hope is articulated in the contemporary Jewish apocalypse 4 Ezra: the pre-existent, hidden Jerusalem will appear and be rebuilt for the world to come (7:26; 8:52; 10:39, 44). But in the messianic kingdom, which precedes the world to come, God’s Messiah will rebuild the City of Zion (13:29-50).

The Messiah ruling the gentiles with an iron rod is an image from the messianic Psalm 2, which recurs in the early Pharisaic Psalm of Solomon 17:23-24 where the royal Messiah is called “to smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter’s jar; to shatter all their substance with an iron rod; to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth.”

In the generation following another war lost, that of Bar Kokhba, Jewish Christians would again raise the hope of an earthly millennium around Zion, as evidenced

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4 I am indebted to David Aune’s introduction and commentary to Revelation (Revelation 1–5 Dallas: Word, 1997). For him Revelation is the product of an apocalyptically oriented Judean who migrated to the province of Asia in Asia Minor during or after the great Jewish revolt (AD 66-70). At some stage in his career he joined the Jesus movement and was recognized as a Christian prophet by congregations in Asia. His book may have developed through a lengthy process of literary growth. It reflects the traumatic experience of the crushing of the great Jewish revolt as well as local persecution of Christians in Asia Minor in the 90ies.
in Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs and Lives of the Prophets. Jewish-Christian theology permeates these Jewish writings, which were edited by Jewish-Christian hands in the second century. Also here we find the hope that redeemed Israel will return to the land.

Revelation, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs and Lives of the Prophets reflect the outcome of two different Jewish revolts with messianic flavour (66-70 and 132-136). After both of them, Jewish Christians looked forward to a true messiah that would rule the land in a millennial kingdom.

Conclusive remarks

I have suggested that the author of Revelation could be a priest or levite who had resided in Judea. Temple theology and priestly traditions belong to the heritage of all Israel, it is not the property of priestly circles alone. But the cumulative evidence of priestly traditions that have set its stamp on John the seer forces the question: Is John a priest or Levite who transforms the traditions that framed him in light of the Christ event, cf. Acts 4:36 and 6:7 that refer to the Levite Barnabas and ‘many priests’ who joined the Jesus camp. John the seer represents a priestly or levitic milieu with a lot in common with the frustrated theologians of Qumran. In the 50ies and 60ies they are, as members of the Jesus camp, at odds with the Sadducean leadership of the temple.

The visions of ch. 4 onwards show John’s struggle with understanding God’s hidden plans during and after the great revolt, in the aftermath of Nero’s persecutions. The visions of the enthroned Lamb give meaning through the destruction of the temple and the end of sacrifices. The same is true for the interpretation of the prayers of the believers as incense rising before the divine throne. The visions in the main part of the book and the (perhaps later) vision of the ruling Christ in 1:9-18 assure John and his circles that the Jesus movement is the legitimate successor of the temple with its divine presence on earth. Opposition from Jewish leaders in Smyrna and Philadelphia in the 90ies confirm for John that Israel is now divided on the issue of the lion-like Lamb and Messiah.

Can there be a connection between the milieus that framed Hebrews and the Book of Revelation? Hebrews knows of the heavenly temple, but the proceedings of this sanctuary are treated in the form of a treatise with scriptural exegesis, not in the form of a

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6 Another text illuminating the background of Revelation is the Gabriel Inscription. This text, written in ink on stone in the late 1st century BCE, is formed as a prophetic revelation from the angel Gabriel about Jerusalem threatened by enemy armies (cf. Rev 20). Then God commissions angelic hosts to fight the evil forces under the leadership of Michael (cf. Rev 11). He sends three angelic shepherds to visit his people and prophecy for them, and then calls these shepherds back to their place (cf. Rev 11, two witnesses prophecy on earth before they are killed by the Beast). See M. Henze, ed., Hazon Gabriel. New Readings of the Gabriel Revelation (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).
visionary writing or apocalypse. But also Hebrews proclaims the believers’ union with
the angels officiating above: “you have come to the city of the living God, the heavenly
Jerusalem, to thousands of angels, to a holy convocation” (13:22-23). This author shares
a realized eschatology like that of John of Patmos: The end-times have broken in and the
believer partakes in this new reality. While Revelation has access to heavenly liturgies
and revelations on how God’s plan for history and his people is unveiled in the present
and the future, Hebrews has its interest in the central liturgical event in the heavenly
temple, the ultimate high-priestly sacrifice of Christ prefigured by the Yom Kippur
sacrifices. Revelation conveys more than Hebrews about the consequences of Christ’s
sacrifice for the church in the world. For John, the primary image for Christ is the Lamb,
not the ultimate high priest, although 1:12-18 depicts Christ as the royal high priest. Also
Hebrews knows the priestly ministry of all believers, since Christ has opened for them a
road through the curtain into the heavenly sanctuary (4:14-16; 10:19-22). Hebrews and
Revelation may derive from priestly milieus that were able to produce both theological
treatises and apocalyptic visions.