

Christ the High Priest

Hebrews 5.5 and John Owen: the meaning of the citation of Psalm 2.7

Owen confesses the difficulty of seeing why Ps.2.7 should be cited in Heb.5.5 as confirmation of Christ's High Priesthood. He examines four explanations before offering his own. He understands the text to refer to Christ's call to the priesthood, rather than the exercise of or entry into the priesthood itself. He explains the reference to Ps.2.7 as a general principle by which all three of Christ's mediatory offices are founded in His eternal Sonship, offices which He has received from the Father.

This explanation seems uncharacteristically vague and loosely connected to the text. The citation is given, as Owen explains, as an antithesis to self promotion to sacred office. Its promise founds Christ's priesthood. As Owen exegetes the text, the Father's decree is strangely dislocated from Christ's relation to sacerdotal office. Of what specific relevance is the decree at the beginning of Ps.2.7 to the priesthood, if the focus of the verse is confined to the eternal Sonship of Christ? It would bring no more specific clarification than an assertion of His full deity or full humanity after the incarnation, perhaps even less. Why is a decree and declaration necessary for an essential aspect of Christ's person, and why is that relevant to the priesthood in particular, when the psalm seems much more pertinent to His monarchy? Moreover why is the decree limited to 'a day', if eternal generation is primarily in mind? What particular relevance can the expression 'I have begotten Thee' when ascribed to this day, thus understood, have to the priesthood? It is also thus obscure what relevance, if any, the inheritance alluded to in Ps.2.8 has to the priesthood apparently demonstrated by the preceding verse.

Owen's caution and tentative introduction underscores his own dissatisfaction with this explanation, it 'is not easily apprehended' and is 'an inquiry not without its difficulties'. For the reader's utility, we'll take the four alternative interpretations he addresses in reverse order.

The fourth interpretation claims that the citation of Ps.2.7 has no reference to the priesthood at all, but is general confirmation of His personal relation with the Father. Owen swiftly dismisses it by reference to the next verse in Hebrews, 'As he saith also in another *place*, 'Thou *art* a priest...?'

The third interpretation asserts that the Holy Spirit intends an allusion not to v.7 of Psalm 2 but to verse 8 especially, which describe the Messiah's obtaining possession of all the earth. The means of this possession is by petition, hence, it is claimed, a priestly work is in mind. Owen cautiously rejects the proposal that the citation is so unfocussed. He also curiously rejects the argument that the petition is priestly, 'the asking here is not his sacerdotal intercession'. How then is Christ's kingly right over all the earth established? By might or by right? If by right, as the exalted mediator, what are its grounds? If as Creator and the preincarnate Word, what need to ask for that which is already His? Is it not as the Kinsman-redeemer of His own and the Reconciler of all things, by the blood of His cross, that He owns not only creating and sustaining rights but *also* mediatorial title to all, which is rooted in His priestly work. This is the foundation of the irresistible justice of His petition with the Father.

The second interpretation is obscurely expressed, though firmly resisted. It declares the linkage between the office of priesthood and the redemption of the firstborn. Owen curiously rejects this completely on the grounds that firstly it is not clear in scripture, secondly that some priests are not firstborn, and thirdly that the order of Melchizedek is distinct from Levi's. It is uncomfortably and uncharacteristically light work to dispense with these difficulties. Firstly, scripture is quite explicit about the substitution of the Levites for the firstborn in Num.3.12-13, 41, 45, with care to make up the numerical deficit in v. 46-51, Num.8.16-18, it is also alluded to in Num.18.6, in the context of the offering for the firstborn in v.15-16 of the same chapter. Secondly, Levi himself was not

firstborn, his family was taken *in place* of the firstborn redeemed at the Passover. Thirdly, the establishing of a new order of priesthood and supplanting of the old requires legal justification, and it is precisely *that* issue which the Holy Spirit here addresses, as we shall begin to examine.

John Owen properly reserves most of his firepower for the first explanation of Heb.5.5. It is a view grounded in the despicable doctrine of Socinianism, which denies the eternity of Christ's essential Sonship. It is claimed that the resurrection constituted or enacted Christ's priesthood. Owen exposes two implications of the doctrine. First, that if Christ was consecrated as priest at the resurrection, His prayers, forgiveness, offerings of thanks, High Priestly intercession and His work on the cross all took place *before* His formal entry into the office. Secondly it confounds His priestly and kingly offices. We might add, thirdly, it also savours suspiciously of an attempt to undermine the eternal Sonship of Christ, by attributing His unique Sonship to temporal acts and works, and wickedly renders His eternal relation to the Father contingent on earthly events. It makes the Creator subject to the creation. Nevertheless that some connexion exists between Ps.2.7 and the resurrection, if only in a declarative sense, is freely conceded by Owen in his comments on Heb.1.5: 'namely, that the eternal generation of Christ, on which his filiation or sonship, both name and thing, doth depend, is to be taken only declaratively; and that declaration to be made in his resurrection, and exaltation over all that ensued thereon. But every one is left unto the liberty of his own judgment herein.' Owen gives four principle rebuttals to the Socinian position. I wish to interact with these to establish what seems a more solid and specific understanding of the text.

First, if this decree constituted or consecrated Christ's priesthood, and the decree was effected at the resurrection, then all Christ's priestly work prior to this event is unconsecrated and informal. Such a position flatly contradicts several passages in Hebrews itself, which specifically identify the Lord's chief priestly work with His days of suffering, temptation and humiliation, Heb. 2.17-18, succouring the tempted, likewise Heb.4.15; in chapter 5, verse 7 as Owen reminds us, 'in the days

of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears'; at the time of His supreme offering, not after, Heb 7.27 and 8.3; in consummation of the type of Yom Kippur, Heb. 9.7,12, and 14, or again in 25, 26 and 28; or in the sin offering Heb.13.11 and 12.

Secondly, Owen shows how the stated position does terrible violence to the sacred work of Christ and vilely discredits and demotes the Saviour's central office. It invalidates the legal foundation of the cross. Properly Christ's consecration as Priest took place when He put on the public ephod of righteousness, displayed the head plate of holiness, demonstrated His golden merits like bells and pomegranates, interceded and represented His chosen people before the Father, and was anointed by the Holy Spirit, all at His official entry into the ministry, after the washing in water, and His priesthood was consummated with fire at Calvary. However Owen in his zeal to refute heresy seems to conflate the complete consecration of Christ and His perfection as the author of eternal salvation, described in Heb.5.9, which plainly follows His sufferings and obedience, v.8. He was consecrated early to priesthood, but His work was vindicated and established in the sight of men and angels not by a carnal commandment, like baptism, but after the power of an endless life. The power and benefits of His purging blood are manifested because He now continues forever and evidently now possesses an unchanging priesthood. By the death and resurrection of the Testator, He has obtained the inheritance, for us. By offering His flesh to be torn and taking it again, He has opened the new and living way. By becoming surety for the Law's fatal curse He has redeemed us and by perfect compliance with the Law, become Mediator of its blessings by faith alone in the flawless merit of His completed work, so that its work may now be perfected in us, His new limbs and members. By both His death *and* resurrection, the foundation stone of a new Temple, a royal priesthood and a holy nation is laid.

Thirdly, John Owen argues that if the decree which founds the Priesthood is effected at the resurrection, not at the offering of Calvary or before it, then Christ *did* glorify Himself. This argument is again founded on a conflation of the completed consecration with the perfection or

vindication of the Lord's priestly work. It is the anticipation of the fulfilment of the promise that leads the eternal Son to humble service and obedience. His full consecration to office is sufficient warrant to remove all objections of presumption, but the promise of being made the Firstborn of the dead could not be effected until after His faith was exercised to death. So in suffering, even He learned obedience and thus was made perfect as the Author of eternal salvation. The same reasoning Owen employs to rebut Socinians might just as easily be applied with greater force to the Holy Spirit's second argument in Heb.5.6, since the priestly oath is revealed at the session of Christ after the ascension, not at the cross nor even the resurrection. If the priesthood was only initiated at the time that its promise is revealed, He would not be priest until in Heaven.

Fourthly, Owen shows that Psalm 2 focuses not on the sacerdotal but the regal conquest of Christ, so that to see a perfection of the priesthood specifically in Ps.2.7 is to blur the distinction in the offices. Yet whilst the distinction is to be honoured, this approach to Psalm 2 seems to weaken the foundation of the monarchy itself. The new stone rejected by the builders and chosen of God as foundation is a priestly stone, Zech.3.9. The monarch Zerubbabel may bring forth the headstone, Zech.4.7, but its key word is 'grace, grace', the gift of a primarily priestly function, by which alone the mountain of sin will be brought to a plain. The Branch may wear a crown and build the temple, but first and foremost, He is a priest, *the priest*, the great High Priest, Zech 6.11-12. Christ can only be King because He is first the ruler of His own holy heart and spirit, Melchizedek. He hasn't come to be served as a King but to serve as a Priest. His Priesthood is foundational and central, His Monarchy all glorious, but derivative. He is great David's greater Son and root, because though 'a man of bloods' it is His own royal bloodshed. He is first the Lamb of God, before He becomes the Lion! Was not Judah ever a better surety than fierce Levi, and by it the gracious supplanter not only of Reuben and Levi, but also of Joseph the just ruler?