

GARMENTS OF LIGHT: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PRIESTLY VESTMENTS FROM RABBINIC SOURCES

According to Exodus 25:8, God gave orders to Moses to construct for Him a tent sanctuary, the Tabernacle, so that He might dwell with Israel. He was to make this tent out of specified materials including expensive textiles and coloured cloths; and from these very same textiles and coloured cloths the priestly vestments were to be fashioned. The Divine Presence had chosen to reside with Israel in the midst of this tent; and the fact that the priestly vestments were to be constructed from the same materials as the Tabernacle links them directly to the Divine Presence, both in the tent and in the Jerusalem Temple which replaced the tent, and was to be described repeatedly in the Torah as “the place where the Lord your God shall make His Name tabernacle”.¹

A modern reader who encounters the detailed description of the priestly vestments set out in English Bibles at Exodus chapter 28 (and its parallel in Exodus 39:1-32) might be forgiven for expressing some mild surprise at the title of this paper. What, she might ask, has “light” to do with these garments, when that word is not found in the entire chapter Exodus 28 and, indeed, occurs but once in the whole book of Exodus, at Exod. 10:23, where it is nothing to do with clothing? Why should “light” be associated in any way with ceremonial vesture which, at first glance, seems to be rather ponderously described and solid in texture? If, however, the same reader were to pursue this question further, and search the chapter for an answer, she might read as far as Exod. 28:30, where two untranslated Hebrew words, Urim and Thummim, make their appearance; and then, turning to a Bible Dictionary or Encyclopedia for information, she would find that the first of these words had quite possibly something to do with the common Hebrew word for light, אור. Might this mysterious pair of words provide a clue to the meaning of the priestly robes, since they are to be placed “on Aaron’s heart when he enters in before the Lord”, and are thus at the very centre of Aaron’s person and activity? Also, they are placed in an item called קושני המשפט

¹ On this important aspect of the priestly relationship to the Divine Presence, see Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel. An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 165-174; Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus שמות* (Philadelphia – New York: The Jewish Publication Society 5751/1991), pp. 178-186.

(Exod. 28:30), often translated as “the breastplate of judgment”, which provides the setting for twelve precious stones; and if the reader pursues the matter further, she will soon discover that ancient peoples had quite definite ideas about the properties of precious stones and jewels. One such notion was the belief that precious stones were sources of light.

A parade example of such a view in Rabbinic texts is afforded by the story of Noah’s ark. At Gen. 6:16, Noah is ordered to make a צֶהָר for the ark. There was considerable discussion in antiquity about the precise meaning of this rare word; but among the Rabbinic Sages it was often taken to mean a precious stone which would serve as a source of light. Thus at *Gen. Rab.* 31:11 R. Levi tells us that it was a *maraglit*, a pearl or polished gem. The same source records disputes about this identification, but notes other Rabbis who interpreted the word to mean a gemstone: a similar view is repeated at *b. Sanh.* 108b; *jer. Pes.* 1:1; and *PRE* 23:1. The Aramaic Targums of this verse are also of interest. The “official” Targum Onqelos translated the word simply as “light”, a rather non-committal rendering which would allow the reader to think of a precious stone as the source of that light if she or he already knew of such a tradition of interpretation. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, by contrast, is quite clear that the צֶהָר is a precious stone,² and alone of ancient Jewish texts this Targum tells us where it came from: Noah is ordered to go to the river Pishon, one of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden, and collect it from there. We shall have occasion to follow this trail a little further as we proceed.

With twelve precious gemstones prescribed in Exod. 28:17-21 for setting in the “breastplate of judgement”, each engraved with a name of one of the tribes of Israel, and with two large precious stones ordered for setting on the shoulder straps of the ephod (Exod. 28:9-12), each engraved with the names of six of the twelve tribes, the high priest’s vestments could well be understood as a source of brilliant illumination. The two large gems on shoulder straps of the ephod are called אַבְנֵי שֹהַם, variously translated as “onyx stones, lazuli stones, cornelians, sardius stones, and beryl stones”; and they hold a special interest, in that they are mentioned in the story of creation. Gen. 2:11-12 speaks of the river Pishon, which surrounds the whole land of Havilah,

² The Targum defines it as יִרְדָּא, a rose (-coloured stone)? Roger le Déaut translates the word as “diamond”.

whose gold, we are told, is fine; and there, in addition, is to be found אבן השהם. Rabbinic sources in general make nothing of this association of the high priest's *shoham* stones with the story of creation,³ although it is unlikely that the matter did not occur to them, still less that they did not know of it. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's reference to Pishon as the source of the precious stone which illuminated Noah's ark is telling in this respect, as is the same Targum's clear statement at Exod.35:27 that "the clouds of heaven went to the Pishon and drew from there beryl stones" to be set on the ephod. The association of these stones with the Garden of Eden and the creation story, which this Targum clearly invites, is also strongly represented in non-Rabbinic Jewish sources, as we shall see presently. That said, it remains the case that, whatever the Rabbis may have said, the Hebrew Bible itself depicts the high priest's vestments as sources of light simply by noting the large number of precious stones involved in their make-up, and by its mention of the Urim and Thummim. In respect of the latter, the Rabbis indicate clearly that *light* is a key factor: *b. Yoma* 73b explains that they are called "Urim because they illuminate their words; Thummim because they bring to completion their words". The same explanation is found in other sources: see *jer. Yoma* 7:44c (end), and in the Targums see Pseudo-Jonathan of Exod. 28:30.

Two further items are concerned with light. The first of these is gold, which in the case of the high priest's attire plays a massively important role. The use of four vestments out of the eight priestly garments listed in Exodus is restricted to the high priest, and pride of place among these goes to the ephod. So much is indicated by the fact that it is the first of any of the vestments to be described (Exod. 28:6-14; 39:2-5); and its principal constituent is gold, the first element to be named out of the five which make it up, the remaining four being blue, purple, crimson, and linen threads. Gold is also the metal used to fashion the plate affixed to the high priest's head-dress bearing the Divine Name: the plate is fashioned of pure gold (Exod.28:36), and is called קִיץ, a "flower" or "shining thing" (see Ps. 132:18 for this last sense of "shine, glitter"). That the gold plate on the high priest's head-band might be described as a "shining thing" should cause no surprise. Even in our own society, gold is still said to have its "glister"; and in antiquity its close symbolic association with the sun insured

³ Exod. 28:9 and 39:6-7 are not cited by classical Rabbinic texts in relation to the high priest's vestments.

its reputation as a “light substance”, catching the rays of the sun or the light of torches, lamps, and candles and reflecting them in unusual and brilliant patterns.

The second item is linen. This is the material out of which is fashioned the high priest’s כַּתְּנֵת, a sleeved garment reaching to the ankles (Exod. 28:4, 39; 39:27). The same garment is to be worn also by ordinary priests (Exod. 28:40; 39:27): it, too, is of linen, although the textile is described in terms slightly different from those employed to speak of the high priest’s tunic.⁴ The linen is called שֵׁשׁ, a word which Hebrew seems to share with Egyptian. It occurs thirty times in Exodus, always with reference to the priestly vestments or the curtains of the tabernacle. Its few appearances outside Exodus link it to persons of very high social status (Gen. 41:42, of Joseph honoured by Pharaoh, also with a chain; Prov. 31:22, of the “virtuous woman” whose husband is a city magnate, 31:23; Ezek. 27:7 of the sails of the King of Tyre’s ships; Ezek. 16:10, 13, of Israel cared for by the Lord as a royal child). This linen is of a brilliant white, reflecting light and, when of the highest quality, having a dazzling appearance. Another term for linen is כָּבֵד, used at Exod. 28:42 to describe the material from which the undergarments of all the priests were made. This last word, however, has an importance all of its own; since Leviticus 16 reports that it was in tunic of such כָּבֵד that the high priest entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. The Rabbis were interested in this special linen used by the high priest on Yom Kippur; but they do not specify what that interest was. We read in *m. Yoma* 3:7 as follows:

In the morning he would put on Pelusium linen worth 12 *maneh*, and in the afternoon Indian linen worth 800 *zuz* – the words of R. Meir. But Sages say: In the morning he would put on (linen) worth 18 *maneh*, and in the afternoon (linen) worth 12 *maneh*, in total 30 *maneh*.

The Pelusium linen hailed from Egypt: both that and the Indian linen were of the very highest quality, and the Rabbis note in the same Mishnah that this linen was provided from the public purse. If the high priest wished to wear more expensive garments, he would need to defray the costs from his own pocket. This note suggests that it might not have been unknown for high priests to purchase the very highest quality linen

⁴ Aaron’s כַּתְּנֵת is apparently to be made of “chequered work” (Exod. 28:39), while those for his sons are not (Exod. 28:40). But the text is ambiguous, and not entirely clear on this matter. On linen as a textile for priestly garments, see further Haran, *Temples and Temple Service*, p. 174.

available. This information is given without comment: might some high priests, at least, have sensed that their contact with the Divine Presence demanded no less?

To this we may add another observation: when the seer Daniel described the angel who appeared to him on the banks of the river Tigris (Dan. 10:4-6), he saw a man clothed with כָּבֵד, with a belt of gold, and whose body was like the precious stone beryl. We should note at once that Malachi 2:7 has no hesitation in describing the priest as “the angel of the Lord of Hosts”; and we might ask whether the Rabbinic information conveyed by the Mishnah which we have just read might not be connected in some way with these matters. The high priest was about to enter the Holy of Holies, and on Yom Kippur of all days he might properly be thought of as an angel in many different respects. In view of what we have said so far about the clothing of the high priest in particular, and the sub-text of light which appears so strongly in the sources which describe that clothing, we may again wonder why in general the Rabbinic Sages had so little to say about light in respect of the vestments?

Not unrelated to this matter is the reception in antiquity of Exod. 28:2, which reports how God ordered Moses to make for Aaron his brother holy garments “for glory and for beauty”, לְכָבוֹד וּלְתִפְאֵרֶת. The word translated here as “beauty”, תִּפְאֵרֶת, is confined in the Pentateuch to this verse delineating the character of the priestly vestments, and to one other occurrence in Deut. 26:19. This latter verse speaks of Israel as God’s treasured possession who is to be set high above all the peoples in respect of praise, reputation, and “beauty”. Given that תִּפְאֵרֶת is so uncommon in the Pentateuch, one might have expected the Sages to comment on it; but for the most part they are silent: the Targums tend to translate this word as “praise” wherever they find it in the Bible, and do not relate it to “light”, even though two of its constituent letters, the *’aleph* and the *resh*, might be perceived as conveying a hint of the presence of “light” within the word.

The problem of Rabbinic silence about these matters only deepens when we consider non-Rabbinic texts which emphasise the importance of light or of “beauty” with regard to the priestly vestments. If we begin with תִּפְאֵרֶת, we cannot fail to notice the key role this word plays in Jesus ben Sira’s description of the High Priest Simon in his vestments. The imagery of light is applied dramatically to him: he is like a “star of

light”; like the full moon on festival days (50:6); and like the sun shining on the King’s temple (5:7). The Rabbis undoubtedly knew this writing, which is quoted, often with approval, in the Babylonian Talmud.⁵ The surviving Hebrew text of his Wisdom book introduces Simon in the following manner:

Was there ever a man born like Joseph? And furthermore his body was visited (נפקדה). And Shem and Seth and Enosh were visited (נפקדו): but above all things living is the beauty (תפארת) of Adam. Greatest of his brothers and the beauty (תפארת) of his people was Simon the son of Yohanan the priest: in whose generation the house (*i.e.*, Temple) was visited (נפקד), and in whose days the sanctuary was strengthened (Ms B Ben Sira 49:15-50:1).

Ben Sira’s description of Simon as he performs the Temple Service directly takes up the terminology of Exod. 28:2 relating to the priestly vestments when it compares the high priest with the figure of Wisdom, and then declares:

When he wrapped himself with garments of glory (כבוד): when he clothed himself with garments of beauty (תפארת); when he went up to the altar of majesty, then he made renowned the court of the sanctuary (Ms B Ben Sira 50:11).

The particular force of all this is apparent only when it is recalled that Ben Sira had earlier in his book (45:6-22) given a description of the first high priest, Aaron, in which he concentrates much of his attention on the priestly vestments. Aaron is the subject of Exodus 28 (and 39), and Ben Sira’s statements reflect this. Prominent is the word “beauty”, תפארת, which Ben Sira applies to the priestly vestments in a place where Exodus does not. Thus Aaron’s head dress is a “crown of beauty”, which makes him beautiful in strength (45:8). There is much talk of “glory” (cf. Exod. 28:2), this radiance being a feature of the vestments and, in particular, the precious jewels which accompany them (45:7, 12). This “beauty” which characterises Aaron robed in his vestments is a property of the high priest Simon also (50:11); and the description of Simon, who may have been alive and serving as high priest when Ben Sira wrote, takes us further into the mystery. For Ben Sira introduces the figure of Simon immediately after speaking of Adam, whose “beauty”, תפארת is above that of all living creatures. Notice how Ben Sira describes Aaron, too, as having been chosen by

⁵ P. W. Skehan and A. A. DiLella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, Anchor Bible 39 (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 20 note quotations from the book introduced by the formula “it is written” at *b. Hag.* 12a; *Nidd.* 16b; *jer.*, *Ber.* 11c.

God above all living creatures (45:16). We have seen that this “beauty” is, as far as Ben Sira is concerned, in some senses a high priestly word: applied to Adam, it suggests a link between the high priest and primaeval times which is reinforced in Ben Sira’s description by his repeated use of the verb פקד, “visit, take care for, remember” in various forms. We are surely here very close to a notion which we do indeed encounter in Rabbinic texts, that the garments of the high priest were the garments which God made for Adam; but that tradition Ben Sira does not explicitly spell out (*jer. Meg.* 1:1; *Tanhuma* תולדות 12; *Numb. Rab.* 4:8; *Aggadat Ber’eshit* 32), and the reader is left to consider it for herself or himself.

Consider it he or she should, not least since the garments of Adam might not simply supply a key to the interpretation of the high priestly raiment as a whole, but specifically serve to associate the vestments with light. In Gen 3:21 we read that the Lord God made for Adam and his wife עור וילבשם, “sleeved tunics of skin, and he clothed them”. The precise interpretation of this statement was subject of dispute among the Rabbis; but several interesting observations are supplied by *Gen. Rab.* 20:12 on this verse:

In the Torah of R. Meir is written ‘sleeved tunics of light’ כתנות אור. These were the garments of the First Adam, which were like a torch, broad above and narrow below. Isaac the elder says, they were smooth as fingernail and beautiful as pearls (כמרגליות). R. Isaac (Yohanan) said, they were like items of finest linen which come from Beth She’an.

The word כתנות used to described the garments made for Adam and his wife is the same word that is used to speak of the long-sleeved, ankle length tunic used by all the priests; and their association with light, pearls, and linen is suggestive when read in conjunction with the information about the priestly vestments we have assembled thus far. The Midrash does not go on to refer to the high priest or to the ordinary priests, even though much of what is said could be applied to them.⁶ Once more, we find

⁶ Alexander Toepel, “When did Adam Wear the Garments of Light?”, *JJS* 61 (2010), pp. 62-71, argues that *Gen. Rab.* 20:12 is a carefully crafted polemic against the Christian theology of Baptism as an enlightenment symbolised by the candidates’ reception of white garments after their immersion and anointing with oil. It was also developed, he maintains, in an attempt to subvert Christian ideas of sin. Certainly the midrash we have quoted could be used by the Rabbis as an anti-Christian polemic, though whether the reading in Rabbi Meir’s Torah originated as such is not, perhaps, as certain as he suggests. He notes that the same section of the midrash goes on to describe Adam’s garments as priestly garments, though the text of *Gen. Rab.* in Theodor-Albeck’s edition nowhere refers to the priests.

ourselves in a situation where non-Rabbinic texts provide quite striking evidence that what we have been discussing was indeed applied to the priesthood. Pre-eminent here is the Book of Jubilees, widely regarded as a non-sectarian writing which reached its final form in the mid-second century BCE. Here, the garments made for Adam are a necessary and immediate provision for his acting as priest, inasmuch as once God had made the garments and dressed the first couple in them, Adam on that very day went out from Eden and “offered a sweet-smelling sacrifice – frankincense, galbanum stacte, and spices in the morning with the rising of the sun from the day he covered his shame” (Jub. 3:26-27).⁷ In the theological scheme of things set out by Jubilees, Eden is the Holy of Holies, the place of the Divine Presence (Jub.8:19); and the mention of Adam’s clothing and his sacrifice come together to underscore a matter repeatedly emphasised by this book that sacrifice, rightly offered – and especially the daily burnt offering and other ceremonies of the Tamid – replicate on earth the worship of the heavenly world. Indeed, Jubilees is explicit that the priests on earth replicate the liturgical functions of the highest orders of angels in heaven (Jub.31:14), the holy ones and “the angels of the Presence”.

Finally, perhaps the most important non-Rabbinic text to consider here is the *Book of Bible Antiquities*, incorrectly ascribed to the authorship of Philo of Alexandria. This text is much better known today than was once the case. It survives only in a Latin translation, probably made from a Greek version of a Hebrew original. It “re-writes” the biblical books Genesis to 1 Samuel, and was composed probably in the first century CE. Whether it had been written before the Destruction of the Temple in 70 is hotly debated; but there is general agreement that the *Book* cannot be dated later than the early second century CE.⁸ It is remarkable for relaying to us quantities of aggadic information which is otherwise first attested in Rabbinic texts dating from some

Possibly he has understood the view of Resh Laqish, quoted in the midrash, that the garments were made of גלאקסינון and were later used by the first-born sons, as a reference to priestly vestments, since before the anointing of Aaron and his sons the first born served as priests (see *m. Zeb.* 14:4; *b.Zeb.* 115b; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Exod. 24:5; *Gen. Rab.* 63:13). The meaning of the word is not clear: Jastrow understands it as “ermine”, which is never mentioned as a material suitable for priestly vestments.

⁷ The translation is that of O. S. Wintermute, “Jubilees”, in (ed.) J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 60. See further Wintermute’s introduction to the Book of Jubilees, its date and setting, *ibid.*, pp. 33-51.

⁸ For discussion of the date, provenance, and literary character of the *Book of Biblical Antiquities* (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*), see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, volume III.1, rev. and ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1986), pp. 325-331.

centuries later. At the same time, however, it contains much un-Rabbinic information, and this includes statements about precious stones, priestly vestments, light, and the Divine Presence which do not sit comfortably with either biblical or Rabbinic models of these things. What follows summarizes and simplifies an immensely complex set of traditions which deserves further, detailed research.

According to the *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, Moses made the priestly garments and the high priestly vestments with their precious stones at God's express command (XI.15; XIII.1). Urim and Thummim, rendered as *demonstratio et veritas*, prove to be of considerable interest to the author (e.g., XXIII.8, 9; XXV.5, 6). In re-telling the story of the Judges, the Book fastens on the figure of Kenaz, father of Othniel, who is little more than a name in the biblical record (Judg. 3:9, 11). Onto this character, the book projects a long and involved narrative of its own, the salient points of which, for our purposes, can be summarized as follows.

1. Kenaz discovered a secret sin of the tribe of Asher, who had found seven golden idols belonging to the Amorites. These were decked out with the most precious gemstones (XXV.9).
2. These idols were oracular, and their gems came from the land of Havilah (XXV.11).
3. The gems shone brilliantly in the Amorite sanctuaries, such that the light of lamps was not necessary (XXV.12). The brightest of them put demons to flight, and restored sight to the blind (XXV.13).
4. No such stones existed in Israel at that time. God ordered their destruction, but declared that fire would not harm them. Without warning, we are now informed that along with these gemstones are certain books, which are likewise indestructible (XXVI.1-3).
5. God says that He will send a cloud to deal with the books, and an angel to remove the precious stones and destroy them in the depths of the sea (XXVI.3-4).
6. Then God will appoint another angel to collect twelve new gemstones from the place where the seven Amorite jewels and been taken. Kenaz must take these "and place them over (*super*) the ephod over against (*contra*) the twelve stones which Moses put in the breastplate in the desert" (XXVI.4).
7. Kenaz tests the Amorite precious stones, which extinguish fire and cause iron to melt. He pours water on the books, which instantly congeals. He understands that God

must have showed these things to Adam before he sinned, and that human beings have subsequently been deprived of them because of their wickedness (XXVI.6). The hint that these stones originated in the region of Paradise, already suggested by earlier mention of the land of Havilah, is thus confirmed.

8. God then acts as he has said: the books are destroyed, and Kenaz finds the twelve new precious stones brought by the angel, each inscribed with the name of a tribe, written “as if the form of eyes were marked upon them” (XXVI.7-9).

9. Kenaz is ordered to put these stones in the Ark of the Covenant with the tables of the covenant. They are to remain there until Iahel (that is, Solomon) builds the Temple. Then Solomon will set them forth before the Lord “above the two cherubim”, and they will be a memorial for the house of Israel (XXVI.12).

10. God then speaks of the future: when the sins of Israel are complete, and enemies rule over the people, God will take the old and new stones and the tablets, and put them in the place from which they were originally brought forth. There they will stay until God is “mindful of the age/world” and “visits” humanity. At that time, he will take these gemstones and others even more excellent, so that the righteous will not need the light of sun or moon, “because the light of the most precious stones shall be their light”. When Kenaz lifted up the twelve new precious stones “as it were the light of sun was poured over them, and the land was gleaming with their light” (XXVI.13-15).

Neither the Bible nor Rabbinic texts provide information of this kind. But this lengthy narrative in the *Book of Biblical Antiquities* enables us to go some way to explaining the rather coy attitude which the Rabbinic writers adopt in respect of the priestly vestments and light. In short, we may say that their attitude is in some measure at least determined by their views of Divine Presence in the Temple, and the place of the priesthood in mediating that Presence in a world where the Temple in Jerusalem is no longer available. To illustrate this, let consider further some of the things the *Book of Biblical Antiquities* tells us, while recalling that it claims to describe a situation where the Temple of Solomon is not yet built, but where the leadership of Israel involves the high priest at a fundamental level. Among the many astonishing things this *Book* has told us is that the Ark of the Covenant contained, from the time of Kenaz onwards, twelve precious stones of miraculous origin which give brilliant light. While in the Ark, they are side by side with the tables of the Torah which Moses received at Sinai.

Now it is fundamental to the teaching of the *Book of Biblical Antiquities* that Torah is a source of light. In its version of the events at Sinai, it records God's intention to give light to his people: indeed, the people will receive this light, God's words are given to enlighten the people, and the events surrounding the giving of the Torah are accompanied by miraculous phenomena involving light (XI.1-2). Descending from the mountain with the tablets, Moses is covered in "invisible light", his face brighter than the radiance of sun and moon (XII.1). At Sinai, God kindled a lamp for his people (XV.6), for the "light of the Law" (XXXIII.3) provides illumination for Israel (XIX.6). With these sentiments no Rabbi is likely to disagree.

But alongside the written Law the *Book of Biblical Antiquities* places another source of illumination, not the Oral Torah, but the precious stones granted to Kenaz. They are in some unspecified manner related to the precious stones in the high priest's vestments, since for a short time they are placed upon the ephod over against the twelve precious stones set there. Quite what this brief encounter between the high priest's ephod and the precious stones of Kenaz might be intended to effect is not *directly* indicated; but the reader may conclude that it establishes a relationship between the high priest and light, which is additional to the light of the Torah given to Moses and all Israel. That such is the case is strongly suggested by what happens when Solomon builds the Temple, according to the *Book of Biblical Antiquities*. The precious stones which had been in the Ark are now placed above the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, from where the Divine Presence had once directly addressed Moses: see Numb. 7:89, where we read:

And when Moses came to the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, the he heard the Voice speaking to him from over the *kapporet* which was upon the Ark of the Testimony, from between the two Cherubim; and He spoke to him.⁹

The only human being to enter the Holy of Holies is the high priest on Yom Kippur and, if we follow the model provided by the *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, the high priest from the time of Solomon onwards would not have been entering a room shrouded in thick darkness (1 Kings 8:12), but a place of brilliant light and

⁹ For further information on this important verse, see J. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary Numbers* 72722 (Philadelphia – New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 5750/1990), p. 59 and Excursus 15, pp. 365-366.

illumination. And this light and illumination would have been experienced by the high priest alone, as a personal privilege; whereas the light of the Torah was available for all Israel at all times. The role of leadership which the high priest should exercise, according to the *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, is underlined by his privileged, personal access to the radiant light shining from between the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, from the very place where God had once spoken to Moses.

This sense of the high priest's access to the Divine Presence is present in the other non-Rabbinic texts we have considered. Ben Sira refers directly to the splendour of Simon the high priest as he emerged "from the house of the curtain" (50:5), that is, from the holy of Holies; according to Jubilees, Adam's clothing with his divinely fashioned garments is a prelude to his offering of incense immediately outside the Holy of Holies; and a writing we have not been able to discuss, the *Letter of Aristeas*, dated probably to the second century BCE, says that the overall appearance of the high priest in his vestments during the Temple service would make one think of "another man from outside the world" (*Ep. Arist.* 99).

That the Rabbis were likely to be somewhat lukewarm in the face of such glorious descriptions of the high priest is not hard to understand. When the classical Rabbinic literature was being consigned to writing, the Temple was no more: high priestly access to the Divine Presence was not on the agenda. This simple historical fact, however, does not of itself account for their reluctance to apply the language of light to the priestly garments, even though Scripture and later non-Rabbinic writers do not hesitate to do so. Rather, their particular understanding of Judaism as based on two complementary Torahs, the one written, the other oral, which has since become *normative* for Jews, does not require priestly access to the Divine Presence, priestly authority, or priestly leadership.¹⁰ Indeed, it is often said that the Rabbinic movement sought to push aside priestly traditions and teachings to establish its own hegemony in the Jewish community. Although this view can be over-stated, and indeed often is, priests remained a force to be reckoned with in the Land of Israel until the fourth century CE, if not later. From that time, archaeology has unearthed lists of the priestly

¹⁰ On the "dual" Torah, written and oral, as a basic and non-negotiable postulate of Rabbinic Judaism, see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), pp. 286-314.

courses and their places of residence in the Galilee; priestly themes become evident in the decoration of synagogues (not themselves Rabbinic institutions);¹¹ and the earliest forms of *piyyut* display great interest in the details of priestly ceremonial and attire. If the Rabbis decided to apply the soft pedal to priestly matters, and especially to the high priest's vestments and their association with light so easily linked with the divine Presence, it is perhaps not surprising.

In addition, some Rabbis at least had a rather “low” view of the Second Temple. Again, this is a matter which should not be over-emphasised; but the Rabbinic literature does preserve lists of items which some believed had been absent from the Second Temple. Among these items we sometimes find the Shekhina, the Divine Presence, being named (see, *e.g.*, *b. Yoma* 71b) as either absent, or present but without the same effect as formerly. Likewise the Rabbis are not in agreement about the presence of Urim and Thummim: even those who declare that they were present in the Second Temple suggest that they did not function (*tos. Sotah* 13:2; *b. Sotah* 48b; *jer Sotah* 9.13, or functioned in a limited manner (perhaps *m. Yoma* 7:5). Even Josephus, who held the high priestly vestments in high regard as symbolic of the cosmos, reported that Urim and Thummim had ceased to function some two hundred years before his own times. In so doing, he also drew attention to a detail which we do not find in Rabbinic texts, but which should by now occasion no surprise. He states that the large stone on the right-hand shoulder strap of the ephod shone forth with brilliant light “whenever God was present at the sacrifices”; but that, too had ceased at the same time as Urim and Thummim (Josephus, *Ant.* III.215-218).¹²

In a recent study of the priestly vestments, Michael D. Swartz has noted in the biblical and non-biblical sources what he refers to as “hints that the garments convey a sort of divinity, or divine authority, on the high priest”. We have encountered plentiful hints of this kind in our short journey through the ancient texts. His monograph, *The Signifying Creator: Nontextual Sources of Meaning in Ancient Judaism* (New York – London: New York University Press, 2012), treats of the “semiotics of the priestly

¹¹ Professor Welch's paper, which we heard this morning, provides an excellent illustration of this point. On the priestly courses, see M. D. Swartz, “Sage, Priest, and Prophet: Typologies of Religious Leadership in the Ancient Synagogue”, in (ed.) S. Fine, *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 99-117.

¹² οποτε ταις ιερουργιας ο θεος παρειη (*Ant.* III. 215).

vestments” at some length, and will prove to be a valuable resource for anyone here who is keen to investigate further the topics we have all too briefly surveyed today. The Rabbinic reluctance to associate the high priest’s garments with light, which is an ancient, even biblical association, certainly begs a question: what significance do the Rabbis attach to the vestments? The answer, in a word, is “atonement”, each garment being held to effect the removal or purgation of a particular sin. The *locus classicus* for this, the most weighty of Rabbinic interpretations of the vestments is *b. Zeb.* 88b (parallels in *b. ‘Arakh.* 16a; *jer. Yoma* 7 end; *Lev. Rab.* 10:6). Such a systematic interpretation of the vestments, however, is not found before the Talmudic period, and, as Swartz points out, is developed further in the early Middle Ages; but that is a topic for another paper.

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