CHAPTER FOUR

JESUS AS HIGH PRIEST AND LORD OF HOSTS (YAHWEH SABAOTH):
LITURGICAL SOTERIOLOGY

It is an obvious matter that the Pascha is first and foremost a liturgical moment. The liturgy in itself—as a ritual performed in the sacred abode of divinity and in front of God—represents an ancient vision which the Christian rite inherits from the First Temple era. As a distinctive mark, paschal theology envisions Christ as the High Priest of heaven and the Pascha as a moment where the initiated ones imitate his priestly qualities. Furthermore, liturgical soteriology undoubtedly implies a strong connection with glory soteriology; there is a bond between them, because the salvific glory is usually conceived (as seen above) as manifested in a liturgical context, and the festivals of Pesach and Pascha were especially acknowledging this vision.

This chapter aims to illustrate that the original meaning of the human presence within the sanctuary was to generate a moment in which liturgical gestures develop into a genuine machinery of salvation. Such machinery was supposed to lead to salvation not through its own mechanisms, but rather by attempting to prompt God’s gracious condescension and salvific agency. The community considers salvation coming through liturgical acts and desires to be, or conceives itself to be, serving together with the angels. Likewise, another version of this idea is that the community intends to become a priestly genre, sometimes even worthy of serving in front of the divine throne. Each of these versions will be explored below by examining the liturgical soteriology of Melito of Sardis, Pseudo-Hippolytus, and Origen, and lastly, the relevant background of this vision of salvation in materials belonging to the First and Second Temples eras as well as rabbinic time.

1. Melito of Sardis

This form of a liturgical soteriology fashioned through the lens of a christological perspective can be detected in the pre-Nicene paschal documents. The earliest one of these texts, Melito’s Peri Pascha, presents the author as a mystagogue initiating his audience in the profound mystery of the
Logos-Christ. In the homiletic discourse of the Paschal night, the bishop of Sardis attempts to lead his congregation to discover the mysterious manifestation of the Logos from the ancient history of Israel to his new economy of passion and resurrection. Melito portrays the Logos-Christ as a sacrificial victim. This follows the already manifested notion of the Logos manifested in history in all those who have suffered; namely, Abel, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, David, and the prophets.¹

The mystery of the sacrificial manifestation of the Logos in history is accomplished through his coming to earth. At this moment, the Logos dresses in the garments of “the suffering one,” an expression denoting humanity, in order to become the appropriate sacrifice able to save in this way the initiated ones and raise them to the heights of heaven.² Reflecting on this act, Melito calls upon all the peoples of the world to the mysterious encounter with Christ the Pascha, the sacrificed King from heaven, in order to receive from him and in him remission of sins, salvation, life, resurrection, and light:

> Therefore, come, all families of men, you who have been befouled with sins, and receive forgiveness for your sins. I am your forgiveness, I am the Passover of your salvation, I am the lamb which was sacrificed for you, I am your ransom, I am your light, I am your saviour, I am your resurrection, I am your king, I am leading you up to the heights of heaven, I will show you the eternal Father, I will raise you up by my right hand.³

It is also supposed that humanity will recover, at the eschaton, the spoiled image of God (PP 56). In addition to this, Melito conceives salvation in liturgical terms. For example, in PP 67–68, the author depicts Christ as the sacrificial lamb able to save humanity from the servitude to the world, the devil, and death. Thus, he procures salvation by consecrating the initiates with his sacrificial elements: his spirit and his blood.⁴ This consecration is confirmed in subsequent verses, with an understanding that Christians become “a new priesthood (ἱεράτευμα καινὸν) and a special people forever.”⁵

And yet, attending paschal liturgy involves more than simply prayer and commemoration. It also engages the participant in a process of discovering the Logos-Christ in his manifestation and eventually in his real nature as

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¹ PP 59.
² PP 47; 100; 102; 103; 104.
³ PP 103.
⁴ PP 67: “sealed our souls by his own spirit and the members of our bodies by his own blood.”
⁵ PP 68.