

The High Priest's Relationship to God

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Brethren, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to present a program about one of my favorite topics: The Book of the Law. Tonight, I would like to speak about the High Priest's relationship to God, and what our Royal Arch Ritual says about it. Some of you may have heard me talk on or write about this subject before, so hopefully you hear something new.

Do you remember these familiar words from the Royal Master Degree? They are from the Sixth Chapter of First Kings.

Here the Shekinah or Divine Presence rested and was visible in the appearance of a cloud over it. From hence the Bathkoll issued, and gave answers when God was consulted. And hence it is that God is said in the Scriptures to dwell between the cherubim; that is, between the cherubim on the mercy seat, because there was the seat or throne of the visible presence of His Glory among them.

We normally do not pay much attention to these words because that is when the human cherubim are standing at the front of the room, and the words are read as quickly as possible so that the tiring Companions can drop their hands and rest. But they are very profound and talk about how God interacted with the High Priest and guided him.

There are three principal parts to this relationship: The High Priest, the Shekinah or Divine Presence, and the Bathkoll. First, the High Priest. Since Moses' time, the High Priests came from the Tribe of Levi, and they were given cities but no land because God was their inheritance. Aaron, Moses' brother, was a Levite and they were the only Israelites entrusted with the religious and priestly duties. As a side note about the twelve tribes of Israel, because the Levites did not receive land, the two sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim, received land instead. This was because Joseph was a favorite son of Jacob, also called Israel. You know those two names, Manasseh and Ephraim, because a number of Masonic Lodges were named after Manasseh, and in the Fellowcraft Degree, we are taught that the Ephraimite had long been a turbulent and rebellious people. The High Priest wore many beautiful vestments, and I have a picture of the Past High Priest's jewel, which is a representation of those vestments.

The Shekinah or Divine Presence was a cloud or pillar that appeared over the Ark of the Covenant. It always indicated when God was present. This was the same cloud that followed the Israelites out of Egypt in Exodus 13:22, which our Masonic Installation Service describes as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And when the Egyptians arrived to attack the Israelites when they were trapped by the Red Sea, the cloud moved in between them until the Red Sea parted and the Israelites could escape. It is the same cloud that filled the tabernacle that was situated east and west in the wilderness as we hear about in the Entered Apprentice's Lecture. Again, this cloud appeared in the Most Excellent Master Degree and filled the newly-dedicated Temple of Solomon. And finally, it is the same cloud that enveloped Jesus, Peter, James, and John on the mountain during the Transfiguration.

The Bathkoll is the small, still voice of God. As you know, God does not always speak in a thundering voice the way he spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. Sometimes it is like the calm voice which spoke to Moses from the burning bush. And you may remember the story of Elijah on Mount Horeb in the 19th Chapter of 1 Kings, when he had fled King Ahab into the desert:

Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

And no one who hears the voice of God is ever the same again. Whenever Moses returned from Mount Sinai or left the sanctuary of the Tabernacle, his face shone like the sun. And there are many instances in the Bible where people simply fell face down when they heard the voice of God. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Romans first fell down when they asked for Jesus and He replied, "I am he".

And so we have described the characteristics of the High Priest, the Shekinah, and the Bathkoll. How did they interact together? Some theologians think that God used the candle light to select letters on the stones in the priestly breastplate and guide the High Priest in making decisions. In the High Priest's vestments, there were two stones called the Urim and Thummim. Some think that the High Priest would say simply, "Should we attack the Philistines in the Valley of Elah?", and God would indicate yes or no by lighting one stone or the other. And this situation continued year after year even when the Israelites began worshipping false Gods and the prophets would warn them again and again until finally, the spirit of God departed from the Temple of Solomon and it was sacked and destroyed by the Babylonians.

So, what is the final lesson here? Your High Priest is not just the leader of a Royal Arch Chapter, but he is supposed to be the representative of the sacred man who asked for God's divine guidance in leading his people. I encourage all of you to look for God's presence and listen for the still, small voice that will guide you on the true path as Royal Arch Masons.

Thank you.

