

Dictionary

OF
THE

Old Testament:

Pentateuch

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C. Van Dam

PRIESTLY SOURCE. See AUTHORSHIP OF THE PENTATEUCH; PENTATEUCHAL CRITICISM, HISTORY OF; SOURCE CRITICISM.

PRIESTS, PRIESTHOOD

The Israelite priesthood was a religious institution within which certain people were given particular and often exclusive rights, roles and responsibilities as mediators between the divine and human realms. The purpose of this article is to describe the Israelite priesthood as portrayed in the Pentateuch. The article will focus on the origin and development of the priesthood, on the symbol system within which it operated and on its roles within Israelite life and faith.

1. The History of the Priesthood: The Pentateuchal Portrait
2. Reconstructing the Historical Priesthood
3. The Message of the Pentateuchal Portrait
4. The Symbolism of the Priesthood
5. The Functions of the Priesthood

1. The History of the Priesthood: The Pentateuchal Portrait.

The origin and history of the Israelite priesthood within the history of the Israelite cult (that is, its system of religious expression) presents one of the most vexing problems for biblical historians. The difficulty has two causes. First, the Pentateuch is composed of a variety of texts that have been composed, collected and edited at different times under differing circumstances. Second, the communicative intention of some of these sources and of the final canonical shaping was not to provide a complete history of the Isra-

elite cult (see 2 below). Although a general portrait, virtually in the form of a montage, of the origins of the priesthood and the official Yahwistic cult of Israel may be gleaned from the Pentateuch as a whole, this portrait is rather incomplete and hazy in places. Moreover, individual traditions in the Pentateuch, as well as in the historical books and the prophetic books, present differing sketches related to the origin and development of the Israelite cult. Attempts of historians to separate out, reorder and bring together all of the sketches like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in order to provide one clear and complete image have not achieved a consensus.

1.1. Priesthood Prior to Moses and the Giving of the Law. As the pentateuchal narrative unfolds, the first direct association of the priestly institution with Israelites designates them all as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" among all of the peoples of the earth (Ex 19:6). However, prior to that reference and prior to the formal creation of the Israelite priesthood (Ex 28-29), which occurs after the exodus and the giving of the *Decalogue at Mount Sinai, the biblical characters demonstrate knowledge of cultic practices. For example, one finds sacrificial acts by *Abel (Gen 4:4), *Noah (Gen 8:20), *Abraham (Gen 22:13) and *Jacob (Gen 31:54; 46:1; see also Ex 24:5). Often scholars have used such evidence to draw the conclusion that in the patriarchal period the patriarchs served as their own priests. However, it is possible that the biblical presentation actually meant to avoid such a picture. M. Haran has argued that in the ancient Near East individuals could offer *sacrifices at *altars without encroaching on the prerogative of the priests, who served the gods within the enclosed sacred space of temples (Haran, 12-42).

The biblical portrait also presupposes a cultural background that from the beginning is familiar with priestly institutions. Examples of priests appear in the Bible prior to the mention of any Israelite priestly system (e.g., Canaanite, Gen 14:18; Egyptian, Gen 41:45; Midianite, Ex 2:16). Indeed, Abraham honors a Canaanite priest, *Melchizedek, who is apparently a worshiper of the same God (Gen 14:18-20; note that "God Most High" is identified here with Yahweh), and Moses' father-in-law was a Midianite priest (Ex 2:16-21; 18:1; see Jethro). Moreover, Exodus 19:20-24 gives the impression that some sort of priestly system of Yahweh worship ex-

isted among the Israelites, v. . . . Egypt, both prior to . . . catalogue at Mount Sinai : . . . instructions recorded I . . . priesthood (Ex 28-29). . . . of this early cultic worl . . . 1.2. The Aaronide Priesti . . . of the Decalogue an . . . the *covenant with the pe . . . delivered from Egypt, Y . . . to establish official Y . . . ship (Ex 25-30). The e . . . tabernacle, a portable sa . . . of "sacred space" in wh . . . dwell in order to l . . . people and at which place . . . ship (Ex 25-26). As in . . . Eastern cultic systems, the . . . space called for the consecra . . . onaries, priests, to attend t . . . place. The first formal men . . . designated as priests to th . . . in Exodus 28:1-4, w . . . brother of Moses, and Aar . . . Abihu, *Eleazar, Ithamar. E . . . their actual consecration . . . for a week, and their . . . consecrated priests are rec . . . However, an earlier referenc . . . being given the role of . . . in the tent of mee . . . which is later a priestly role. . . . tion of Aaron with Nadab . . . of Exodus 24:1, 9, gi . . . their "selection" took pla . . . "Aaron the Levite" (se . . .) was chosen as a co . . . (Ex 4:14). The distinc . . . manner of consecrati . . . (Ex 28-29 and Lev 8) . . . will serve as the "high priest . . . specifically mentioned u . . . Pentateuch (Num 35:25). . . . priesthood became a dy . . . onide family (Ex 29:9). . . . was also apparently . . . on to Aaron's third son . . . (Num 3:2), after Eleazar's tw . . . Nadab and Abihu, were const . . . ing unauthorized fire bet . . . 3; see Num 20:25-28, v . . . names Aaron's successor). I . . . additional reason for the pe

isted among the Israelites, who had recently exiled Egypt, both prior to the giving of the Decalogue at Mount Sinai and prior to the formal instructions recorded later for establishing the priesthood (Ex 28—29). The form and content of this early cultic worship is not clarified.

1.2. The Aaronide Priesthood. Following the giving of the Decalogue and the establishment of the *covenant with the people whom Yahweh had delivered from Egypt, Yahweh took the initiative to establish official forms and means of worship (Ex 25—30). The establishment of the *tabernacle, a portable sanctuary, created an area of "sacred space" in which God would symbolically dwell in order to be present with his people and at which place they could officially worship (Ex 25—26). As in other ancient Near Eastern cultic systems, the creation of sacred space called for the consecration of sacred functionaries, priests, to attend to the matters of that place. The first formal mention of persons being designated as priests to the God of Israel occurs in Exodus 28:1-4, where *Aaron, the brother of Moses, and Aaron's sons (*Nadab, Abihu, *Eleazar, Ithamar, Ex 28:1) are named. (Their actual consecration as priests, which lasted for a week, and their first official actions as consecrated priests are recorded in Lev 8—9.) However, an earlier reference to Aaron and his sons being given the role of keeping the lamps burning in the tent of meeting (Ex 27:20-21), which is later a priestly role, along with the inclusion of Aaron with Nadab and Abihu in the events of Exodus 24:1, 9, gives the impression that their "selection" took place earlier, perhaps when "Aaron the Levite" (see 1.3 below on Levites) was chosen as a spokesperson with Moses (Ex 4:14). The distinctive garments, role and manner of consecration described for Aaron (Ex 28—29 and Lev 8) presuppose that he will serve as the "high priest," an office that is not specifically mentioned until much later in the Pentateuch (Num 35:25). By divine decree the priesthood became a dynastic role of the Aaronide family (Ex 29:9). The role of high priest was also apparently hereditary, being passed on to Aaron's third son, Eleazar (Ex 6:23; Num 3:2), after Eleazar's two older brothers, Nadab and Abihu, were consumed by fire for offering unauthorized fire before Yahweh (Lev 10:1-3; see Num 20:25-28, where Eleazar becomes Aaron's successor). However, another traditional reason for the perpetuation of the

priesthood through a son of Aaron is given in Numbers 25:10-13 (also 1 Macc 2:26, 54). Here the descendants of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, are granted a lasting priesthood because of an act of loyalty to Yahweh by Phinehas.

1.3. The Levites. In addition to the priests proper, there was a lesser order of cultic functionaries known as the Levites. This distinction between the two orders is clearly delineated in Exodus and Numbers. However, Deuteronomy fails to make such a clear distinction and appears to speak of the priestly nature of the whole tribe of *Levi. According to Exodus and Numbers, the Levites primarily assisted the priests in their duties. On a scale of "holiness," the Levites stood between the people, who were "common," and the priests, who had been sanctified for closer contact with the divine realm (see 4.2 below on holiness; see Num 8:5-22 for the purification of the Levites). As a result, the Levites could perform functions that the layperson was not permitted to do, but they were not permitted to fill some of the roles of the priests. According to the traditions in Numbers, the Levites initially had two main duties (Num 3:5-10; 4:1-49; 18:1-32). First, Levites were expected to aid the priests by guarding against encroachment. Encroachment occurred when those who were common or less holy illegally came into contact with the more holy objects of the cult. Second, they were to help with the labor of loading and transporting the cultic paraphernalia of the tabernacle from place to place. (Milgrom [1970] has demonstrated that in priestly texts *mīšmeret* means "guarding" rather than the more general "service," and *'ābōdā* refers to portage-related duties rather than to "work" in general.) Over time the role of the Levites changed somewhat. Once the Yahwistic temple cult became permanently fixed at a site, the latter duty of portage would have become obsolete. According to the traditions in Chronicles, when David and Solomon centralized the temple cult in Jerusalem, the Levites were also given the role of temple musicians, a function not found in the Pentateuch (1 Chron 15:16-22).

Pentateuchal traditions give us two accounts for the origin of the secondary role of the Levites, although the accounts are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In Exodus 32, when the people followed Aaron in the worship of the golden calf, it was the "Levites" who zealously executed those who had committed apostasy. For this act

of loyalty the Levites were appointed for their special role. Deuteronomy also attributes priestly roles to the tribe of Levi in association with an act of zeal (Deut 33:8-10), although it is not clear whether or not the text is referring to the *golden calf incident. On the other hand, Numbers 1 does not count Levi among the twelve tribes to be numbered but reckons them as simply appointed to the charge of the tabernacle (Num 1:47-53). The reason for their not being counted among the other tribes is found in Numbers 3, where they are taken by God as belonging to him in exchange for the firstborn male children of Israel, who had been spared when God struck down the firstborn males of Egypt.

Because of their special professional role of serving the Israelites as cultic personnel, the whole tribe of Levi, which included the priestly lineage, were not given a tribal allotment of land. Instead they were to be given certain towns with accompanying pastoral land scattered among the other tribal territories (Lev 25:32-34; Num 35:1-8). Also, they were to be maintained by tithes given by the people (Num 18:20-32). Another tradition explaining the landlessness of the Levites is found in Genesis 49:5-7. Here Levi and his brother *Simeon are cursed for their acts of violence (traditionally associated with their actions found in Gen 34), so that they (that is, their tribal families) would be scattered about the land of Israel.

2. Reconstructing the Historical Priesthood.

Although a general portrait of the priesthood may be gleaned from the Pentateuch, individual traditions appear to present differing sketches about the origin and historical development of the Israelite cult. As a result, biblical scholars have raised questions about the historical accuracy of the pentateuchal portrait and have sought to reconstruct a more consistent picture. For instance, because of the various traditions regarding the Levites, biblical historians have debated whether the term Levi originally designated a person from the tribe of Levi, and by extension became used for these cultic functionaries, or if the term originally had a cultic connotation and somehow became associated with a tribe called Levi. (A. Cody, however, has convincingly shown that Levi is a proper name and not an appellative [Cody, 29-38].)

2.1. Critical Reconstructions. One classical and

popular thesis among biblical historians for sorting out the differences in the individual biblical traditions was tied to the identification and dating of sources in the Pentateuch. This thesis is known as the Documentary Hypothesis (see Source Criticism). Toward the end of the eighteenth century, after over a century of scholarly efforts to identify and date literary strands in the Pentateuch, J. Wellhausen promoted this thesis. In his work, Wellhausen accounted for some of the differing "sketches" in the traditions about the priesthood by arguing a logical progression from more primitive and less organized forms of cultic expression to later and complex forms. The linchpin of his argument was the thesis that the literary source containing the complex cultic forms, the Priestly source, or P (represented for the most part by Exodus 25-40, Leviticus and Numbers), belonged not to the Mosaic age but to the postexilic time and was fabricated as a defense for later cultic practices. Less formal and complex cultic activity was then to be found in the earlier pentateuchal sources of J, E and D. For instance, he posited the following development. In the patriarchal period, primarily recorded in J and E, the patriarchs themselves could function as priests. In the period of the judges, Levites, a name for cultic functionaries, came to refer to the preferred priestly personnel. They later became associated by literary invention with the tribe of Levi. However, there were other competing priestly houses. The D source, mainly Deuteronomy, came from the late monarchy when Josiah centralized the cult at the temple in Jerusalem around 621 B.C. At this time all Levites could serve as priests in Jerusalem. Later, after the return from the Babylonian exile, the Priestly source (P) told about stricter cultic reforms that had occurred. By this time Levites had been demoted to the role of second-class cultic functionaries.

This very influential reconstruction promulgated by Wellhausen did not, however, resolve all difficulties left by the gaps and the differing sketches of the individual traditions found in the OT. Moreover, the linchpin of his thesis was found to be problematic. New evidence of complex cultic institutions with, for example, differing orders of priestly personnel, were found to exist in the ancient Near East even prior to the time of Moses (see Sabourin, 98-157). Scholars also began to date some of the terminology and

practices in P as preexilic in these factors, during the there have been several ot struct the history of the Isr. example, F. M. Cross argue cles could be explained b ancient priesthoods that vi an Aaronic priestly house Bethel and Jerusalem, and priesthood at Dan, Shiloh the Negev (Cross, 195-215: other hand, sees one priest the ancient Levites, the kin were distinguished later in tion in the northern kingd the southern kingdom ("Aa

2.2. A Critique of Histor

Many of the assumptions of constructions are sound. Fo out their history the peopl different sociological, econ settings: family, village, city, t statehood, vassal nation and foreign empire. One would c ise nature of the priestly off those different settings in te size and specialization of its the ways and means of pries the complexity of its ritual c the current generation of bi need to incorporate our inc about the sociological nature into our understanding of p (e.g., Anderson).

The basic pentateuchal pe to contain different sketches possibly coming from dif sources. If possible, it would identify and date any sources ing that have been employed i of the Pentateuch. One migl tural and sociological setting o ing and editing to influence emphases and even the agen and editors, although the tot composition of each text and i Pentateuch was inspired to ac communicative intent. Unde perspectives would then guide i preter as he or she seeks to rec historical developments of th hood and the role the priestly- erent times in Israelite life.

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 struct the history of the Israelite priesthood. For
 example, F. M. Cross argued that the discrepan-
 cies could be explained better by positing two
 ancient priesthoods that vied with one another:
 an Aaronic priestly house with sanctuaries in
 Bethel and Jerusalem, and a Mosaic (Mushite)
 priesthood at Dan, Shiloh and other places in
 the Negev (Cross, 195-215). M. Haran, on the
 other hand, sees one priestly line going back to
 the ancient Levites, the kinsmen of Moses, who
 were distinguished later in terms of their loca-
 tion in the northern kingdom ("Levites") or in
 the southern kingdom ("Aaronides").

2.2. A Critique of Historical Reconstructions.
 Many of the assumptions of historical-critical re-
 constructions are sound. For instance, through-
 out their history the people of Israel lived in
 different sociological, economic and political
 settings: family, village, city, tribal alliance, royal
 statehood, vassal nation and a province within a
 foreign empire. One would expect that the pre-
 cise nature of the priestly office changed within
 those different settings in terms of its roles, the
 size and specialization of its members, its status,
 the ways and means of priestly sustenance and
 the complexity of its ritual expression. Indeed,
 the current generation of biblical scholars will
 need to incorporate our increasing knowledge
 about the sociological nature of ancient Israel
 into our understanding of priestly institutions
 (e.g., Anderson).

The basic pentateuchal portrait also appears
 to contain different sketches of the priesthood,
 possibly coming from different traditional
 sources. If possible, it would be important to
 identify and date any sources and layers of edit-
 ing that have been employed in the composition
 of the Pentateuch. One might expect the cul-
 tural and sociological setting of the times of writ-
 ing and editing to influence the perspectives,
 emphases and even the agenda of the authors
 and editors, although the total process of the
 composition of each text and its inclusion in the
 Pentateuch was inspired to achieve God's total
 communicative intent. Understanding those
 perspectives would then guide the modern inter-
 preter as he or she seeks to reconstruct both the
 historical developments of the Israelite priest-
 hood and the role the priestly cult played at dif-
 ferent times in Israelite life.

However, the presence, the diversity and the
 historical setting of the individual traditions re-
 garding the priesthood are not the focus of the
 canonical form of the Bible (see Childs, 84-91,
 145-74). In some traditions the priestly institu-
 tional features are said to have originated by di-
 vine, Mosaic or royal decree. In other instances,
 cultic features are linked to historical events. But
 in all cases, the emphasis is on the divine design
 of the Israelite cult. The biblical cultic texts, the
 bulk of which are not historical narrative but are
 instructional and expository discourse, preserve
 the essence of the Israelite Yahwistic cult.
 Therefore, although reconstructing the history
 of the Israelite priesthood is a valid scholarly en-
 terprise, the message about the priesthood in
 the canonical form of the Bible is not to be
 found in such reconstructions.

3. The Message of the Pentateuchal Portrait.

What the biblical writers and editors preserved
 and presented was the message about the priest-
 hood's divine origin, its lofty calling to holiness
 and the dangers of its role being perverted. In
 the Pentateuch, priestly perspectives have been
 integrated with the overarching biblical theme
 of a covenant made with God. Whereas texts
 that focus on the concept of covenant present
 Israel's relationship to Yahweh in terms of a le-
 gally binding contract, the texts that focus on
 the priestly cult present that relationship in
 terms of a symbol system that emphasizes Yah-
 weh's holy presence. The Pentateuch asserts
 that proper worship was established by God and
 was an integral part of the covenant. Both *law
 and praxis came from Yahweh. The modern
 tendency to separate cultic law from ethical law
 was unknown.

Because Israel was called to be a holy nation
 and a kingdom of priests to the nations (Ex
 19:6), the Israelite priests had an analogous
 function of being a holy priesthood to Israel.
 The priesthood held the people accountable to
 Yahweh by teaching (Lev 10:10-11; Deut 33:10),
 a role that was expanded from cultic precepts to
 the totality of the Torah. This was done within a
 ritual complex that at every turn reminded the
 people of the awesome holiness of Yahweh and
 their covenant to be holy (see 4 and 5 below).

However, not to be overlooked in the pen-
 teuchal material is the brutal reminder of the
 dangers of forsaking God's decrees even in the
 face of God's graciousness: Aaron created a

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 t.) Such unclean-
 sin, although the
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cleansing to remove the impurity. On the other hand, flagrant sin resulted from the mismanagement of tolerated uncleanness or from breaches of prohibited uncleanness, such as incest, adultery (see Sexuality, Sexual Ethics) and spiritualism (see Lev 18; 20).

Things were also classified as "holy" or "common." In the ancient Near East, that which belonged to the realm of the gods was holy. So too, for Israel, that which specifically belonged to Yahweh was holy (Lev 27:9; Num 3:13; 8:17). The normal state of people and things outside of the divine realm was common. Holiness, like uncleanness, was a "power" that in some cases was contagious and could sanctify that which had been common, making it holy. However, God's holiness, God's life-producing essence, had to be approached with utmost respect. Coming into contact with that which was holy could be quite risky. The Israelites believed that improper close contact with God could result in death (Ex 19:21-24; Num 4:19-20; for an example, see 2 Sam 6:6-7). Holiness was found in gradations; there was a scale of holiness whereby some things were more holy than others (e.g., the difference between the holy place and the holy of holies within the tabernacle/temple, Ex 26:33-34). In general, contact between nonadjacent elements on the scale of holiness was prohibited (e.g., that which was less holy could come into contact with the holy, but that which was common could not come into contact with the more holy).

The two classification systems of clean/unclean and holy/common shared a complex interrelationship. For example, a layperson could be common and in a state of being clean or unclean. Also, an object could be holy (a sacrifice) and clean prior to use but unclean after being used to remove impurity.

4.3. Sin and Pollution. Dealing with the distinctions of clean/unclean and holy/common was a serious matter. Mismanagement and violations of these distinctions were sins that resulted in harmful consequences for individuals and for the community. In the pentateuchal portrait, when Israel entered into covenant with Yahweh, they entered into a relationship involving God's presence with them. God's presence in Israel's midst was represented by the portable tabernacle and later by the temple. By extension of this spatial concept of God's presence, Israel viewed the Promised *Land as God's land, in which

they were received as sojourners (Lev 25:23). Improper care of the distinction between holy and common when approaching to worship God was an egregious affront to God's gracious presence and could result in death (Lev 10:1-2). Also, the failure to preserve the distinctions of clean/unclean resulted in spiritual "pollution." Such acts of defilement polluted God's land and, more specifically, God's dwelling place as represented by the tabernacle or temple. Such pollution impeded Israel's relationship with God and could result in the people being vomited out of the land (Lev 18:24-29). As a result, the sin of one person had consequences on the total community's relationship with God.

The sacrificial system, for which the priests were the main overseers, provided a major means of dealing with the polluting influence of sin, particularly for unintentional sins as opposed to defiant sins (Num 15:22-31). In some cases, the purging influences of sacrifices were required to cleanse God's dwelling place. However, in other cases purification was not possible. The party guilty of causing such pollution often was to be executed (Lev 20). Continued pollution would result in Israel being "vomited out" of the land (Lev 18:28).

5. The Functions of the Priesthood.

The priests worked to create, maintain and reestablish the divine order symbolized by the classification systems of the clean/unclean and the holy/common. The charge given to the priests in Leviticus 10:10 to "distinguish" (*habdil*) between the holy and the common and between the clean and unclean uses the same Hebrew root for the divine action of making distinctions in the process of creation (Gen 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18). Therefore, one might say that, just as God established the original creational distinctions between order and chaos, life and death, the priests in particular, and to some extent all people who were created "in the image of God," became "cocreators," or at least "comaintainers," with God. By maintaining those distinctions, they upheld the creational order from the constant threat of encroachment of chaos and death (see Gorman). (See too the use of *habdil* in Leviticus 20:24, 25, 26: as God has made a "distinction" between Israel and other nations, Israel is to make "distinctions.")

The priestly role corresponded with their unique "position." They occupied the boundary

zone or "no man's land" between the holy (the presence of Yahweh) and the common. To be a priest was to operate in the danger zone of encroaching upon the divine realm for the purposes of representing the divine will to the community and representing the community before God. To be in the presence of the holy God was to risk death (Ex 20:18-19; 28:35, 43; 30:20-21; Lev 10:1-3). Those set aside to be priests were placed in a special state of holiness that allowed them access to the "dwelling" of God (on their consecration, see Ex 29; Lev 8-9). The priests had to wear special garments (see Priestly Clothing). These garments not only symbolized the priests' representative status (e.g., the breastplate of the high priest had twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel) but also "protected" them from dying when entering before Yahweh (e.g., their undergarments, the high priest's bells and possibly the seal on his turban; Ex 28). The priests also had to live by stricter rules of cleanness than the layperson, particularly when on duty (Ex 30:17-21; Lev 10:8-9; 21:1-22:16). The priests' position of having a greater status of holiness than that of the layperson not only put them at greater risk of dying but also placed them in a position of being able to serve the community of faith effectively.

The following is an attempt to order the various roles of the priests; however, it should be recognized that these categories, which are not prescribed in the Pentateuch, are imperfect. Certain roles may fit under more than one category or perhaps be better listed separately.

5.1. Custodians of the Cult. The priests were the general custodians of the instructions that were designed to set the community apart as holy to Yahweh (Lev 19:2). As custodians of these instructions, they had several subroles.

5.1.1. Teachers. The priests were teachers. They held the responsibility for teaching the people the instructions regarding clean/unclean and holy/common (Lev 10:10-11; Deut 33:10; see also 2 Chron 35:3; Ezek 22:26; Hag 2:11-13). The various instructions, which expressed these classifications, constantly reminded the people as they went about their daily lives that their God, Yahweh, was a God of life and order and that they should reject "death" and choose life. Yahweh was unfathomably holy and could not dwell with impurity. Moreover, in Jewish tradition the priests' role as teachers expanded from teaching cultic precepts

to teaching the totality of the Torah. The movement toward this fuller responsibility is found already in Deuteronomy 31:9-13, where it is prescribed that every seven years, at the Feast of Booths, the priests were to read the laws of the covenant to the assembled people. Perhaps the reason that the levitical cities were spread throughout the land was to make them accessible to the people for instruction. As the people of this holy God, they needed to be aligned with the divine design of life and order to be in right relationship with Yahweh. The priests taught them how to live in that right relationship.

It has also been suggested that priests might have had the role of perpetuating the traditions regarding the origin of their sanctuary and cultic practices, as do the priestly functionaries at some relatively modern Palestinian cultic sites (Gray, 222-23). One might suppose that the Israelite priests knew the stories of the origins of their cultic practices as found in the Pentateuch and that they might have carried the teaching responsibility of passing on these traditions.

5.1.2. Boundary Interpreters. The priests were interpreters of the cultic boundaries in time, space and status. They had to clarify and set the boundaries in the ritual complex according to the guidelines that had been established under divine guidance. It was their role to distinguish between the holy and unholy, the clean and unclean (Lev 10:10; 11:47; see Foods, Clean and Unclean). That task involved making an abstract principle clear in concrete situations. For instance, guidelines for distinguishing clean and unclean animals are given in Leviticus 11. These guidelines seem to come from the *zoological classification system of their culture and aided in identifying animals that might have symbolically seemed to have blurred the bounds of the creational order. However, not all animals are listed in such texts. The priest would have to make decisions about other animals based on these guidelines. Another example is found in the case of skin diseases, in which the priests virtually played a diagnostic role. The person who was afflicted with a condition that might be unclean was brought to the priests. They examined the condition and pronounced the person as clean or unclean (Lev 13-15). One would also suppose, however, that new situations and new questions would always be arising. In such cases it was probably up to the priests to clarify the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable be-

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 was to be set apart to be a different people. For
 example, the community was to avoid the pollut-
 ing practices of the nations that God was expel-
 ling from the Promised Land (Lev 18:3, 24-28;
 20:22-25). Although some pagan practices are
 specified in such lists as Leviticus 18-20, not all
 such practices are mentioned. Apparently the
 priests were given the responsibility to make
 these decisions. Practicing cultic rituals at the
 right time was also important (Lev 23:1-44).
 However, keeping a lunar calendar was not al-
 ways an easy task. Although not stated in the
 Pentateuch, the priests probably also had to
 track astronomical signs and determine when
 the holy times and seasons began and ended.

**5.2. Agents of Divine Blessing, Holiness and Pu-
 rification.** The priests, as occupants of the medial
 zone between the divine and the common, en-
 abled communication and transference be-
 tween the holy and the common or unclean. It
 was their job to establish, maintain and restore
 the proper creational order of persons and
 things.

5.2.1. Purifiers. Most important, priests had
 the responsibility of purifying the holy place
 and the *altars, which symbolized Yahweh's
 dwelling with Israel. First, they "made atone-
 ment" for accrued pollution from sins. That is,
 by the manipulation of the blood of the sacri-
 fices, they cleansed away the pollution and
 made God's dwelling holy again, bringing the
 situation back to its proper state and order (e.g.,
 Lev 4:1-6:7; 16:1-19). Second, they purified the
 person whose impurity had lasted more than
 seven days, such as in the cases of childbirth
 and abnormal genital discharges (Lev 12; 15:13-
 15). The primary function of the sacrificial sys-
 tem, which the priests oversaw, was to restore
 God's dwelling and people to their orderly status
 and to enable a right relationship with God.

5.2.2. Spokespeople for God. The priests spoke
 for God in at least two ways. First, there were
 times when they pronounced divine *blessing
 upon the people (Num 6:22-27; Deut 10:8). Such
 words were apparently seen as efficacious: the
 pronouncement resulted in wholeness and
 prosperity. Blessings might be pronounced over
 the people on public occasions (Lev 9:22) and
 possibly in response to cultic petitions. Although
 this latter function is not clarified in the Pen-
 tateuch, there is some evidence from passages

such as 1 Samuel 1:9-20 (perhaps Judg 17-18)
 and the Psalms (see Ps 12:5 [MT 12:6]; 85:8 [MT
 85:9]; 118:26) that, in response to petitions, a
 priest might have spoken a prophetic word of
 blessing on God's behalf. (See also words of
 blessings that might have been spoken by priests
 in Ps 20:1-5 [MT 20:2-6]; 115:14-15; 121:7-8;
 128:5; 134:3.)

Second, perhaps closely related to the last
 function, the priests also pronounced oracles
 announcing the will of God for certain deci-
 sions, sometimes having employed the Urim
 and Thummim, a divining device (Num 27:21;
 Deut 33:8; see Ezra 2:59-63). The exact nature
 and function of the Urim and Thummim is un-
 certain. However, it does appear that they were
 devices used by the priests to determine the di-
 vine response to a petition by a leader, such as
 *Joshua or a king (Num 27:21; 1 Sam 14:41;
 28:6), or to determine someone's status in cultic
 matters (Ezra 2:59-63; Neh 7:63-65). These cases
 of priests speaking for God appear to be prima-
 rily in response to petitions that were made in
 cultic settings.

5.2.3. Judges. In Israelite history, the realm of
 judicial authority probably progressed from the
 heads of households to recognized elders of sta-
 tus to appointed officials. (In Genesis the patri-
 archs ruled their households, and in Ex 18:5-27
 and Deut 1:9-18 Moses instituted a system of
 judges.) It is expected in Deuteronomy 16:18-20
 that each town would have appointed *judges.
 However, one also finds provision for the priests
 to assist as judges in difficult cases (Deut 17:8-13;
 19:16-17; 21:1-5). It appears that in these difficult
 cases, which involved a lack of witnesses or con-
 flicting witnesses, the priests stood as divine rep-
 resentatives and perhaps were expected to
 divine the truth as they did in the case of the
 wife suspected of adultery (Num 5:11-31).

5.2.4. Participants in Warfare. The priests par-
 ticipated in *warfare, which was basically viewed
 as a religious activity. In their role as diviners
 (see 5.2.2 above) the priests were called on to
 give oracles from God about whether or not the
 people should go out to war (Num 27:18-21;
 Judg 20:26-28). Deuteronomy 20:2-4 has the
 priests addressing the troops before they go out
 to battle. The priests probably also went out to
 battle on many occasions. First, one notes that
 Phinehas went out to battle taking articles from
 the sanctuary and the trumpets for signaling
 (Num 31:6). Second, if it was customary to take

the ark of the covenant and the trumpets into battle, as appears to be the case in nonpentateuchal material (Josh 6; 1 Sam 4; 2 Sam 11:11; the imagery of Ps 24; see also Num 10:33-36; 14:41-45), then the priests would have had to be present, because they were in charge of the portage of the ark (note that Levites may carry the ark, but the priests are in charge [Num 3:31-32; Deut 31:9, 25] and of blowing the trumpets [Num 10:1-9]). Finally, it is possible that the priests made decisions about the purification and division of the booty that was taken in war, at least when it was perceived as sacred war (Num 31:21-31; see *Hērem*).

5.3. Supervisors of Cult Objects. Priests would have had some administrative roles. At the least, they would have had charge of caring for the sacred paraphernalia. (See Num 3:5—4:33, where they supervise the Levites.) For instance, although the Levites were to help serve the priests by transporting the cultic objects (Num 3:27-32), the Levites themselves could not come into direct contact with these objects. The priests first covered and prepared the objects (Num 4:1-20). Furthermore, as the temple became part of the hub of the centralized state government, the administrative roles of the priests probably grew in complexity. (At least by the time of the second temple period, the temple had some banking functions [2 Macc 3:10-12].) Any precise historical development based on the biblical sources is difficult to reconstruct.

5.3.1. Guards. The priests literally served as guards. People and objects that were common or less holy were not to come into contact with those that were more holy (Num 3:10). The priests were to "bear the guilt" of the sanctuary (Num 18:1); that is, they were held responsible to keep others from profaning it. Priests had, along with the Levites, the role of protecting the holy things from encroachment by persons and things less holy or unclean. They had to do so upon the penalty of their own lives (Num 18:1-7; for clarification of technical language, see Milgrom 1970 and 1990).

5.3.2. Tithe Assessors and Collectors. As early as the book of the covenant (Ex 20:22—23:33), in connection with the feasts, tithes of *firstfruits were to be brought to the house of Yahweh (Ex 23:14-19). In Exodus 30:11-16 a payment of atonement money for each Israelite was to be given to Yahweh, presumably through the priests, and to be used for the service of the tent

of meeting. Other systems of tithes and offerings are also prescribed (e.g., Lev 27:1-33; Num 18:8-32; Deut 14:22-29; 18:1-8; 26:1-15), which generally fell under the supervision of the priests and Levites, who were to receive part of this income as compensation for their service to the people. Indeed, in some cases priests were to determine the value, often in monetary terms, of what was to be given (Lev 27:8, 11-12, 14, 18, 23). Such monetary transactions were based on the standard weight of the "sanctuary shekel" (Lev 27:3, 25).

The priestly activities, symbolized in rituals involving sight, smell and sound, time, space, and status, taught Israel the healthy fear of being confronted with the presence of the holy God, the Creator of life and order. Israel was reminded of the great gap between their God and humanity. Only the priests, who were specially sanctified, could step carefully into that gap and mediate between the divine and human realms. Through their instructions and rituals, the priests warned Israel how its waywardness, intentional and unintentional, polluted God's dwelling and hindered God's presence in their covenant relationship. Individuals and community alike were called to be "clean" and pure before God. Moreover, through the priestly role, Israel saw that Yahweh's graciousness was not limited to mighty historical acts and the anointed leadership of key individuals. God had provided the means of removing the pollution, of purifying the unclean person and of restoring the divinely intended order. It was through the priesthood that this message of grace was mediated.

See also AARON; ALTARS; ATONEMENT, DAY OF; BLOOD; FESTIVALS AND FEASTS; FOODS, CLEAN AND UNCLEAN; LEVI, LEVITES; LEVITICUS, BOOK OF; LIFE, DISEASE AND DEATH; MELCHIZEDEK; NADAB AND ABIHU; PRIESTLY CLOTHING; RED HEIFER; RELIGION; SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS; TABERNACLE.

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R. K. Duke

PRIMEVAL HISTORY. See GENESIS, BOOK OF.

PROGENY. See GENESIS, BOOK OF; PROMISES,
DIVINE.

PROMISED LAND. See LAND, FERTILITY, FAM
INE.

PROMISES, DIVINE

Divine promises play an important role within
the Pentateuch. They occur frequently, take a
variety of forms and are important factors in the
development of the plot that unites the books of
*Genesis through *Deuteronomy. Moreover, be
cause certain major promises remain unfulfilled
by the end of Deuteronomy, this orientates the
Pentateuch toward the future.

The diversity of divine promises found
within the Pentateuch makes it impossible to ex
amine all of them. Almost inevitably whenever
God speaks his words, they contain elements
that may be labeled promises; those that convey
a negative expectation are more commonly
called threats. By their very nature, covenants
initiated by God contain divine promises. Imme
diately after the *flood, for example, God prom
ised that he would never again strike down every
living creature as he had done on this occasion
(Gen 8:21-22). Yet while divine promises perme
ate the whole of the Pentateuch, the promises
associated with the patriarchs are especially im
portant (e.g., Gen 12:1-3; 22:16-18; 26:2-5; 28:13-
15; 35:11-12; 46:3-4). Focusing chiefly on the
concepts of land, descendants and blessing,
God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
play a special role in the plot of not only the
Pentateuch but also the books of Joshua to
Kings.

1. Divine Promises and the Patriarchs
2. Obstacles to Fulfillment
3. Beyond the Pentateuch
4. Conclusion

1. Divine Promises and the Patriarchs.

Within the Pentateuch the divine promises asso
ciated with the patriarchs have attracted the
most attention from scholars. In part this re
flects their frequency, for as J. Blythin observes,
almost all of the divine speeches in Genesis
12—50 include promises. Biblical scholars, how
ever, diverge in two main ways regarding their
assessment of these promises. First, opinions
vary concerning the number and content of