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The Pentateuch as Torah

*New Models for Understanding Its
Promulgation and Acceptance*

Edited by

GARY N. KNOPPERS and BERNARD M. LEVINSON

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The Torah as the Rhetoric of Priesthood

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In the Second Temple period, the Torah gained canonical authority through its association with the priesthoods of the Jerusalem and Samaritan temples. The Torah, in turn, legitimized these priests' control over both the temples and, for much of the period, over the territory of Judah as well. An original function of the Pentateuch then was to legitimize the religious and, by extension, the political claims of priestly dynasties. This point has rarely been discussed and never been emphasized by biblical scholars, however, which makes the subject of the Torah's relationship to the Second Temple Aaronide priesthood as much about the ideologies of academic culture as about ancient religious history.

Fear of theocracy is once again a prominent feature of Western political culture. With so-called fundamentalists of various religious traditions bidding for political power and Western military deployments defined frequently in terms of a struggle between liberal democracy and militant religious fanaticism, many public statements voice concern about the growing influence of religion and of religious leaders on political affairs. Concerns of this sort are a very old and persistent theme in Western culture. They date from late antiquity and the Middle Ages and have played prominent roles in the political and religious revolutions that have repeatedly changed the course of European history.

Suspicion of theocracies has influenced biblical studies as well. Scholars know well and warn their students of its distorting effect on 19th-century descriptions of ancient Israel's religious history. Newer ideologies, however, have not been any more sympathetic to the rhetoric of priestly hierarchy. For example, proponents of neither Marxism nor of liberal capitalism look favorably upon aristocratic oligarchies, which in economic terms is what the Jewish priesthood became in the Second Temple period. Nor can feminist critics be expected to celebrate the priests' patriarchal hierarchy that systematically excluded women from Israel's institutionalized religious leadership.

As a result of this political history, modern scholarship has been prone to celebrate Israel's prophets and to be fascinated with its kings, but not with its priests. Though ideological critics are no doubt correct that the Bible has usually

been read much too sympathetically, this has not been the case with the Priestly literature of the Torah, especially with its rhetoric of priestly privilege. Priestly rhetoric has routinely been criticized and dismissed, or defended only by turning it into something that it originally was not. Our biases, however, place stumbling blocks in the path of studies of the origins and nature of Priestly rhetoric in its original historical situation, that is, as used by priests to influence their listening and reading audiences in ancient Israel and Judah. Interpreters with historical interests cannot avoid bringing our own culture and ideological commitments into our work, but we can become conscious of the effects of such biases and begin to imagine other interpretive possibilities. Reading, just like theater, requires a conscious suspension of disbelief, not just in order to accept (momentarily) the imaginative worlds that books can present but also to accept (momentarily) the ideologies that they reflect and project. What is needed to advance our understanding of the origins of Priestly literature (henceforth P) are new, imaginative construals of the *values* in Priestly rhetoric, construals that consciously try to avoid the biases inherited from later religious and political commitments.

Leviticus justifies control of Israel's priesthood by Aaron's descendents and their monopoly over most of its duties, privileges, and sources of income. As many interpreters over the last two centuries have noted, Leviticus's portrayal of the preeminence of the high priest and the Aaronides' monopoly over the priesthood corresponds historically to the situation of Jewish and Samaritan priests in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. A hierocracy even developed in Second Temple Judaism. It was strongest under the Hasmoneans in the second and first centuries B.C.E. but they built on foundations of priestly authority and political influence that had grown steadily over the previous three centuries.¹ It was in the Second Temple period that the Pentateuch, with the Priestly rhetoric of Aaronide legitimacy at its center, began to function as authoritative Scripture for Jews and Samaritans. It is therefore to this period and this hierocracy that P's rhetoric applies, either by preceding the hierocracy and laying the ideological basis for it (if P dates to the Exilic Period or earlier) or by reflecting and legitimizing an existing institution as it began to accumulate religious and civil authority (if P dates from the early Second Temple period).²

1. For one recent reconstruction of the historical situation behind the hierocracy, see Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002) 130–40.

2. Critical scholarship has usually dated P to the Exile or later (e.g., classically, Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [trans. J. S. Black and A. Menzies; repr., Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973; German 1st ed., 1878] 165–67), a position that continues to be maintained by a large number of contemporary commentators. A significant minority, however, advocate a date

The preserved Priestly rhetoric does not speak in its own voice, which makes the rhetorical situation in the Second Temple period hard to assess. Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers use the voice of God and the actions of Moses to legitimize the role and authority of the Aaronide priests. The priests thus disguised their role in the arguments of their times by hiding behind God and Moses and casting their speeches in the distant past. As a result, it may appear that much of the preserved Second Temple rhetoric tilts against the high priestly family and criticizes their practices (Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, 1 and 2 Maccabees, 4QMMT).³ That view can only be maintained, however, if one categorizes the Torah as "preexilic" and so ignores its rhetorical impact in the Second Temple period.⁴ Whatever their date of composition, the Pentateuch's Priestly texts functioned with far greater rhetorical power in the Persian and Hellenistic periods than they ever had previously, because they functioned increasingly as scripture. The reason for their growing authority was precisely the fact that the Torah did express the voice of the Aaronide priests who controlled both the Jerusalem and Samaritan temples and sponsored the scriptures that authorized these temples' rituals.

The early stages of the canonization of Scripture depended upon the books' association with the Samaritan and Jewish priesthoods. It seems to me that this point is incontrovertible regardless of which particular explanation for the Torah's growing authority one accepts. Whether the Pentateuch became authoritative because of Persian imperial authorization, as Peter Frei maintained, or because of the influence of the temple library, as Jean-Louis Ska argues, or because of its erudite deployment by temple scribes to support theocracy, as Eckart Otto maintains, or because of its use to enculturate a Judean elite against Hellenistic influences, as David Carr proposes, or because of its use as the textual

in the 8th century B.C.E. or earlier (most prominently Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* [AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991] 23–35). Some readers may be surprised that I do not engage such issues here. It has become a reflex for many biblical scholars to mentally categorize all approaches to the Pentateuch on the basis of the literary dating and compositional issues they propose. Much can be said about the literature and rhetoric of the Pentateuch, however, that does not depend on speculative reconstructions of its history. The subject of this essay is a case in point. Only a compositional theory that dated Leviticus 1–16 in the Hasmonean period or later (a difficult position to maintain, because the earliest fragments of Leviticus among the Dead Sea Scrolls have been dated on paleographic grounds to the mid–3rd century B.C.E.) could contradict the point I am making here and therefore make compositional issues relevant to this topic.

3. Chronicles presents a more complicated evaluation of priests and Levites; see Gary N. Knoppers, "Hierodules, Priests, or Janitors? The Levites in Chronicles and the History of the Israelite Priesthood," *JBL* 118 (1999) 49–72.

4. This trend is corrected by the essays of Eckart Otto (pp. 171–184) and Sebastian Grätz (pp. 273–287) in this volume that explore aspects of the interaction between the evolving Torah and other Second Temple period literature.

authority for temple rituals as I have suggested, the Torah's influence grew in tandem with the influence of the dynasty of the first postexilic high priest, Joshua, who claimed descent from Aaron.⁵ As the temple law book, the Torah shared the prestige of the Jewish and Samaritan temples and in turn validated the monopolistic claims of the temples and, especially, their priesthoods over the offerings of Israel.

Scholarship usually links the Torah with the temple, rather than with the priesthood, but I think that the emphasis should be shifted to the priests. A single family of Aaronide priests led not one but two religious and ethnic communities of increasing size and influence in the last five centuries B.C.E.⁶ According to Josephus, a Samaritan leader gained permission from Alexander to

5. Peter Frei, "Zentralgewalt und Lokalautonomie im Achämenidenreich," in *Reichsidee und Reichsautorisation im Perserreich* (ed. Peter Frei and Klaus Koch; OBO 55; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1984 [2nd ed. 1996]) 8–131; idem, "Die persische Reichsautorisation: Ein Überblick," *ZABR* 1 (1995) 1–35; translated as "Persian Imperial Authorization: A Summary," in *Persia and Torah: The Theory of Imperial Authorization of the Pentateuch* (ed. and trans. James W. Watts; SBLSymS 17; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001) 5–40; Jean-Louis Ska, "Persian Imperial Authorization: Some Question Marks," in *Persia and Torah: The Theory of Imperial Authorization of the Pentateuch* (ed. James W. Watts; SBLSymS 17; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001) 161–82; Eckart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium im Pentateuch und Hexateuch* (FAT 30; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 248–62; David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 201–85; James W. Watts, "Ritual Legitimacy and Scriptural Authority," *JBL* 124 (2005) 401–17, republished in *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) chap. 9.

6. The history of the Persian period high priesthood has been the subject of intensive historical investigation and debate as to the exact succession of high priests. A list of the high priests preserved in Nehemiah 12 names six generations: Joshua/Jeshua, who oversaw the building of the second temple, and his descendants Joiakim, Eliashib, Joiada, Jonathan/Johanan, and Jaddua. This list is supported by Josephus and, to some extent, by the Elephantine papyri. Josephus attests that the same family controlled the high priesthood for another century: Jaddua was the ancestor of high priests Onias I, Simon I, Manasseh, Eleazar, Onias II, Simon II, Onias III, and his brother Jason. Frank Moore Cross and others have argued that the six names of Nehemiah's list are too few for a period of two hundred years. Cross suggested that the practice of papponymy, naming a son for his grandfather, led to the omission of several generations from the list (Frank Moore Cross Jr., "A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration," *JBL* 94 [1975] 4–18; see also Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* [trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961] 401–3; Geo Widengren, "The Persian Period," in *Israelite and Judaeen History* [ed. John H. Hayes and J. M. Miller; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977] 506–9; Hugh G. M. Williamson, "The Historical Value of Josephus' Jewish Antiquities," *JTS* 28 [1977] 49–67; Lester L. Grabbe, "Josephus and the Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration," *JBL* 106 [1987] 231–46). James VanderKam has defended Nehemiah's list as accurate ("Jewish High Priests of the Persian Period: Is the List Complete?" in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* [ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan; JSOTSup 125; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991] 67–91; idem, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004] 97–99). This debate does not, however, significantly undermine the testimony of ancient sources that a single family seems to have controlled the high priesthood in Jerusalem from ca. 535 until 175 B.C.E.

build a temple on Mt. Gerizim for his son-in-law, the son of a Jerusalem high priest, to serve as high priest himself.⁷ Inter-marriage between Samaritan leadership and the Jewish high priestly dynasty had previously stirred controversy in the Persian period (Ezra 10:18–23, Neh 13:28). The fact that Samaritans and Jews shared both the Torah and a common priesthood can hardly have been a coincidence. Aaronide priests of Joshua's family also founded and directed a Jewish temple in Leontopolis, Egypt.⁸ It seems that the Aaronide priests, or some of them at any rate, were far less committed to Deuteronomy's doctrine of the geographic centralization of cultic worship in Jerusalem than they were to P's doctrine of the Aaronides' monopoly over the conduct of all cultic worship, wherever it might take place.

The Aaronide high priests claimed special authority to wield the voices of the Torah (Lev 10:10–11) and, probably, of the prophets as well. It may be that at some times other factions, within and outside the priesthood, were able to deploy the authority of the Torah against Joshua's dynasty, as seems to have been done by Ezra, an Aaronide himself from a slightly different branch of the family.⁹ The descendants of Joshua seem to have retained their hold on the high priesthood until the 2nd century, however, and on the legitimizing rhetoric of the Torah as well. In light of the priesthood's practices, it is therefore not

7. On the family relationship between Samaritan and Jewish high priests, see Josephus, *Ant.* 11.302–3, 321–24.

8. Josephus's somewhat contradictory accounts of this temple can be found in *Ant.* 12.397, 13.62–73 and *J.W.* 7.426–32.

9. 1 Esd 9:39, 40, 49 actually grants Ezra the title *archiereus* "chief priest," but no similar title appears in Ezra or Nehemiah either for Ezra or for anyone else. Ezra 7:1 traces his genealogy through the high priestly line back to Aaron, but it does not link up with the postexilic high priests listed in Neh 12:10–11; see also 12:26. Interpreters are divided over whether he held the post or not; see n. 5 for reconstructions of a single family's monopoly over the high priesthood, excluding Ezra. For summaries of the debate, see Klaus Koch ("Ezra and Meremoth: Remarks on the History of the High Priesthood," in *Sha'arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* [ed. Michael Fishbane, Emanuel Tov, and Weston W. Fields; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992] 105–10) and Ulrike Dahm (*Opferkult und Priestertum in Alt-Israel: Ein kultur- und religionswissenschaftlicher Beitrag* [BZAW 327; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003] 83–84), both of whom concluded that Ezra was, in fact, high priest. Gary N. Knoppers has pointed out that the title "the priest" with which Ezra is designated appears also in Chronicles as a common designation for high priests ("The Relationship of the Priestly Genealogies to the History of the High Priesthood in Jerusalem," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* [ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003] 109–33). The rhetoric of Ezra–Nehemiah, however, weighs against the conclusion that it intends to describe Ezra as high priest; see VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas*, 45–48. Not only do the books not explicitly distinguish Ezra in that role, but his reforms do not deal with how priests do their business in the temple, which was the high priest's primary responsibility, but rather with their marriages and other relations with foreigners. Contrast this with the contents of 4QMMT, the letter from Qumran, which in the 2nd century B.C.E. questioned the Jerusalem priests' conduct of the offerings precisely in order to challenge their legitimacy, especially that of their high priest.

accidental that the Torah contains no general prohibition on intermarriage, as the authors of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah think it should. The Aaronide rhetoric of Leviticus at the heart of the newly canonized Torah occupied the most powerful position from which to influence these debates.

Ancient and modern interpreters have routinely criticized and dismissed Priestly rhetoric, or defended it by turning it into something that it originally was not, through allegory, moral analogy, and theological spiritualization.¹⁰ If we can momentarily bracket some of our negative value judgments about ancient priests with which medieval and modern history and tradition have indoctrinated us and try to evaluate the ancient Jewish priesthood in its own religious, political, and historical context, this would make possible a more sympathetic evaluation of the ancient Jewish hierocracy. This seems to be what the Priestly writers hoped would result from their legitimation and celebration of the Aaronide priesthood. There is solid evidence in Second Temple period literature that the Torah achieved this, and more. The Priestly work extends the priests' authority beyond ritual procedures only to matters of teaching Israel the distinction between clean and unclean and holy and common (Lev 10:9–11), and Deuteronomy extends their authority only a little further to the extent of staffing a high court of appeal (Deut 17:8–13) and teaching the Torah as a whole (31:9–13). Nevertheless, P's elaborate descriptions of the investiture and anointing of Aaron and his sons (Leviticus 8–9; also Exodus 28, 39) distinguishes the priesthood as the most celebrated office of leadership in the Torah.¹¹

10. See Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, chap. 1.

11. Much of the scholarly discussions of the offices of Israel have focused on Deuteronomy's descriptions of prophets, priests, and kings. In comparison with P's elaborate celebration of the Aaronides, however, Deuteronomy's treatment of these offices is very utilitarian and limited. The king, famously, has no duties but to copy and read the Torah (Deut 17:14–20). Prophets receive a more positive commission, but the text's chief concern has to do with the validity of the prophet's message, which must be determined by its accuracy (18:15–22) and its accord with the henotheistic teachings of Deuteronomy itself (13:2–6[1–5]). Bernard M. Levinson has recently described Deuteronomy's program as a utopian constitution that designates separate spheres of judicial, cultic, and monarchic authority under the governance of a legal text, which is Deuteronomy itself ("The First Constitution: Rethinking the Origins of Rule of Law and Separation of Powers in Light of Deuteronomy," *Cardozo Law Review* 27 [2006] 1853–88). Ancient Israelite society never actually operated in such a fashion, as Levinson is the first to admit. One should note, however, that Deuteronomy's program of cultic centralization in the Jerusalem temple did not produce a balance of power, even in theory, so much as a tilt in power toward the temple's hierarchy: "levitical priests" must supervise the king's copying of the scroll of law (17:18) and rule on judicial cases "too difficult" for local courts (17:8–13), and it is they, of course, who control the reading and teaching of the Torah itself (31:9–13). So, despite their many differences from one another, Deuteronomy supports P's privileging of priests. Deuteronomy's focus on Levites rather than P's Aaronides would hardly have impeded the Torah's pro-priestly function in the Second Temple period, when priestly genealogies harmonized both groups into one family. On this point, see Otto, *Das Deuteronomium im Pentateuch*

It is not surprising then that the Torah's unparalleled celebration of the priests gave them increasing political influence as the Second Temple period progressed. The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira (3rd century B.C.E.) shows clearly the influence of P's rhetoric on Jewish political ideals. In his "praise of famous men" (44:1), Ben Sira gives Aaron (45:6–22) greater space than Moses (44:23–45:5), lingering over the high priest's vestments (cf. Exodus 28). He then concludes his book with a peon of praise for the high priest Simon son of Onias. He first celebrates Simon's construction projects and political achievements as if he were a king (50:1–4) before lavishing much greater attention on his appearance "when he put on his glorious robe and clothed himself in perfect splendor" (vv. 5–11) and officiated over the temple offerings (vv. 12–21). It is no wonder that later Roman governors insisted on controlling the use of such politically potent clothing.¹² The ability to imagine such sympathetic receptions for P's rhetoric of priesthood is therefore a precondition for understanding its intended function, as biblical scholars are increasingly coming to recognize.¹³

The Priestly Code's rhetoric of the divine right of priests to control Israel's offerings will, however, not carry much weight with modern audiences for whom rituals of this sort are little more than historical curiosities or religious symbols. More plausible will be a reevaluation of the ancient hierocracy on the basis of its historical effects, rather than on its supposedly divine origins. Its value needs to be judged against the achievements of the priestly dynasty whose rule it legitimated. It is against the background of priestly history in the Second Temple period, therefore, that the rhetoric of Leviticus should, in the first instance, be judged.

und Hexateuchi, 248–62, esp. 260, who argues for Priestly, specifically Zadokite, interests behind both Deuteronomy separately and the hexateuchal and pentateuchal redactions that combined it with the other books.

12. Josephus, *Ant.* 15.402–8, 19.93, 20.6–16. The *Letter of Aristeas* (96–99), Philo (*Mos.* 2.109–35; *Spec.* 1.82–97), and Josephus (*Ant.* 3.151–78; *J.W.* 5.227–36) also give extensive descriptions of the priestly garments that echo through rabbinic literature and that attest not only to the fascination they aroused but also to the rhetorical function of literary descriptions in furthering the priesthood's mystique and power; see Michael D. Swartz, "The Semiotics of the Priestly Vestments in Ancient Judaism," in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience* (ed. Albert I. Baumgarten; SHR 93; Leiden: Brill, 2002) 57–80.

13. This point has been emphasized over the last forty years through the detailed explication of priestly rituals by, especially, Jacob Milgrom and Baruch Levine in their monographs and commentaries. They have defended the rationality and realism of priestly rituals against the old and widespread tendency to disparage them as primitive and superstitious. This trend has not yet, however, led to reevaluations of the religious achievements of the Second Temple priesthood itself, though the methodological case for interpretive sympathy when reading about priests has recently been argued by Antony Cothey ("Ethics and Holiness in the Theology of Leviticus," *JSOT* 30 [2005] 131–51 [135]) and by Jonathan Klawans (*Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006] 248).

By what standards should we judge the priests' effectiveness? There are many possibilities, running the gamut of our contemporary religious and political opinions. I suggest starting with two criteria that balance ancient and modern sensibilities. The first should consist of the religious standards set forth by the Hebrew Bible itself, because they represent the values to which the priests themselves subscribed and the values that their contemporaries expected them to epitomize. Furthermore, these standards remain potent religious ideals in the modern world. Though the contents of the Hebrew Bible are diverse and express multiple opinions on various issues, for the most part they nevertheless subscribe to a common ideal of how Israel's religion should be expressed. Included in this ideal is loyalty to YHWH, the god of Israel, expressed in some texts as pure monotheism, and also expressed by a commitment to fulfilling the ethical and religious stipulations of the Torah, conceived either as oral divine instruction in earlier texts or as the written laws of the Pentateuch in later texts. Evaluating the priests' leadership against these standards typical of biblical literature can help us avoid complete anachronism. Our judgments will employ values to which the ancient priests themselves most likely subscribed, because they wrote a significant part of the Hebrew Bible and championed the written Torah's authority.

How well does the Aaronides' record stack up against broad biblical ideals? The Aaronide priests oversaw the establishment of cultic worship in Judah at Jerusalem, in Samaria on Mt. Gerizim, and in Egypt at Leontopolis on the basis of the Torah's ritual instructions.¹⁴ Furthermore, it was in the Second Temple period that the Torah as a written text began to function normatively for temple practice in both Jerusalem and on Mt. Gerizim, and probably in Leontopolis as well. The Torah was officially recognized as Jewish temple law by the Persians (according to Ezra 7) and was sufficiently respected by the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt for them to sponsor an official Greek translation of it (according

14. The orthodoxy of the Samaritan's practice was contested by ancient Jews who derided it as idolatrous (see 2 Kgs 17:24–41; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.3), but it is difficult to take this criticism seriously. Samaritans, like Jews, revere the Torah and its laws. Though interpretive and textual differences, as well as ethnic rivalries, separated the two communities, and though there is evidence of vast variations in the nature and degree of religious observance within both communities in the Second Temple period, aspersions against the Samaritan cult reflect polemics, rather than historical practices; see Pieter W. van der Horst, "Anti-Samaritan Propaganda in Early Judaism," in *Persuasion and Dissuasion in Early Christianity, Ancient Judaism, and Hellenism* (ed. Pieter W. van der Horst et al.; Leuven: Peeters, 2003) 25–44. On the cultural similarities between the two communities, see Gary N. Knoppers, "Revisiting the Samaritan Question in the Persian Period," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. M. Oeming and O Lipschits; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006) 265–89. With respect to the close connections between the Judean and Samaritan Pentateuchs and the relatively late separation between the Samaritans and the Jews, see the essay by Reinhard Pummer in this volume (pp. 237–269).

to the *Letter of Aristeas*).¹⁵ Whether or not these official recognitions were really as significant as these Jewish texts make them appear, it is clear that as the Second Temple period progressed the Torah was increasingly recognized as a symbol of Samaritan and Jewish religious distinctiveness. Accompanying the Torah's elevation to iconic status was the establishment and growing recognition of monotheism as normative for Jews and Samaritans. Though in the late 5th century the existence of a polytheistic Jewish temple in Elephantine, Egypt, passed without negative comment in the correspondence of that community with authorities in Judea and Samaria, such a situation is unlikely to have been so easily tolerated in the 2nd century and later.¹⁶

In other words, as the dynasty of Joshua gained preeminence and power in the Second Temple period, increasing numbers of Jews and Samaritans seem to have conformed to the Bible's most basic notions of proper religious practices and beliefs.¹⁷ This was the case to a much greater extent than at any previous time, according to the account in the books of Kings of the religious standards of the monarchic period and according to most modern historical accounts of that period as well. It can safely be said, then, that on the basis of the Bible's own standards, the priestly hierocracy of the Second Temple period produced markedly better religious results than did the monarchs of the preexilic period, most of whose religious policies are repudiated by biblical writers as rejections of God's covenant with Israel.

It is, of course, hardly surprising that the priests led Jews and Samaritans to live in basic accord with the Torah's teachings: they wrote and edited much of it, and probably played a decisive role in canonizing it. The surprise comes rather from the failure of modern commentators to point out the correspondence between biblical ideals and the achievements of the Aaronides' hierocracy.¹⁸ The

15. On the Septuagint and the *Letter of Aristeas*, see the essay by Arie van der Kooij in this volume (pp. 289–300).

16. See Reinhard Kratz's helpful contrast between the Jewish communities at 5th-century Elephantine and 2nd-century Qumran in this volume (pp. 77–103). I do not, however, think that the Pentateuch was originally in some tension with the interests of the Jerusalem priesthood, as Kratz suggests. It is notable that out of all the positions of authority in Second Temple Jewish society, only the institution of the priesthood receives explicit and extensive rhetorical support from the Torah. It depicts the high priesthood as the most important office in Israel.

17. My blithe reference to "the Bible" in this paragraph is, of course, anachronistic since there was no canon at the beginning of the Second Temple period, the Torah became increasingly authoritative through the middle of the period, and the full Tanakh gained recognition only late in the period, if then. I use the term here intentionally, however, to emphasize the convergence between priestly influence and the ideals of the emerging scriptures.

18. Even studies of priestly roles and the history of Israelite/Judean priesthoods tend to focus primarily on the preexilic and immediately postexilic priesthoods and limit the priests' influence to the "theological" ideas contained in P, giving little or no attention to their influence on the later political and religious development of Second Temple Judaism; see, for example, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage*,

heritage of later religious and political struggles against theocratic institutions continues to weigh heavily on how the religion of the Second Temple period is portrayed in scholarship, especially in broader treatments of biblical theology or religion.¹⁹

I turn therefore to a different, more secular standard for evaluating the priests' effectiveness, namely the practical effects of their rule. What were its consequences for the people of ancient Israel, Judea, and Samaria? This evaluation imaginatively poses a question common in modern political campaigns: were Samaritans and Jews better off due to priestly leadership and rule, or not? Though political expediency is no virtue according to many biblical texts, political success garners respect from most ancient and modern historians. From the long perspective of two millennia, it is easier to reach a consensus on what counts as "successful" leadership than it is for more contemporary events. The Judean kings who revolted against Babylon in the early 6th century B.C.E. and the Jewish rebels who fought against Rome in 66–70 C.E. were obvious failures by this standard, as the disastrous effects of their policies for the people of Judea make clear.

How effective was the Aaronide hierocracy in promoting the survival and welfare of Jewish and Samaritan peoples? To answer this question is to judge the leadership of the Aaronides on the basis of political pragmatism, or on "the artfulness of cultural persistence" to use Steven Weitzman's more attractive

Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 113–14, despite his astute description of the effects of anti-priestly biases in scholarship (66–68); also Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995). One significant effort to rectify this imbalance was Richard D. Nelson's *Raising Up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993). He chronicled the bias in biblical scholarship against priests, which he blamed primarily on Protestant thought, and wrote positive theological reflections on the priesthood (101–5). Though Nelson recounted the glorification of the high priest in Second Temple literature, however, his own evaluation of Joshua's Second Temple dynasty remained muted. His final list of priestly heroes ("Ezekiel, the Priestly Writer, Ezra, and the Maccabees" [105]) omits the high priestly line entirely, except insofar as it is represented by P.

19. Take only one prominent example of this nearly universal tendency in modern biblical studies: Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) categorized the Hebrew Bible's means for mediating the divine presence as "Torah," "King," "Prophet," and "Sage," but where one would naturally expect to see "Priest," he listed "Cult" instead (567–704). His discussion under that heading marked a major advance over most other theologies that give ritual worship much shorter shrift. He highlighted the theological stereotyping that has bedeviled Christian biblical theologies and worked hard to avoid it by devoting 30 pages to the cult's theological implications. Nevertheless, discussion of the priesthood receives only 1 page of that (664–65). Like much of the rest of the field, Brueggemann hid the political implications of the Pentateuch's Aaronide claims by focusing on rituals and shrines rather than on priestly personnel.

phrase.²⁰ The political tendencies of the Aaronide hierocracy led by Joshua's dynasty are fairly clear and relatively consistent, as attested by a variety of sources over six centuries. The high priests in Jerusalem maintained accommodationist policies towards imperial overlords (Persia, Alexander, the Ptolemies) resulting in three centuries of largely peaceful relations with them.²¹ They oversaw the reconstruction or, at least, the reorganization of the Jewish community in Jerusalem and Judea and its gradual growth in population and wealth. The same period of time witnessed the growth in wealth and political influence of Jewish communities in Babylon and especially in Egypt, where Jewish priest/generals leading Jewish armies sometimes played major roles in Ptolemaic politics. Though the extent of Aaronide influence in Babylon is unknown, priests and Levites made up the bulk of returning exiles from Babylon in the 6th and 5th centuries. Later, Aaronides founded and maintained a Jewish temple in Egypt for almost three centuries. The Samaritans also recovered from the catastrophes of the Assyrian wars and, like the Jews, solidified their religious and ethnic identity at least partly under the religious leadership of Aaronide priests.

One might well ask whether the various governors of Judea and Samaria in the Persian and Ptolemaic periods should get some of the credit for these political and religious accomplishments. It is, of course, the job of governors to accommodate imperial interests, so such policies no doubt reflect their influence. With the sole exception of Nehemiah, however, no governor of these territories gets significant recognition in the surviving rhetoric from the period (except in the Elephantine papyri). By the Ptolemaic period, if not before, the office itself seems to have been dispensed with in Judah as the temple's high priests took over greater political functions, eventually culminating in the hierocracy of the

20. Steven Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), who presents a series of vignettes into strategies for cultural survival and persistence in order to revalue more positively a history that has often suffered from historians' neglect and disdain. Weitzman's focus on literary evidence leads him to ignore the history of the rise of the Aaronide hierocracy (6th to 2nd centuries B.C.E.) for the very good reason that there are few literary sources for this period. My own less subtle analysis of broad political trends uses other means to make a similar case for reconsidering the values that guide historical depictions of this period.

21. The fact that one 4th-century Judean governor and, perhaps, high priest minted coins with inscriptions in Paleo-Hebrew script led William Schniedewind to see their origin in "a nationalist Jewish movement led by the priests" (*How the Bible Became a Book* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004] 174). That is possible, but the coins still bear the title "governor," which hardly suggests outright rejection of the empire. A more likely setting for this development has been suggested by David Carr. He described the increasing valuation of the Hebrew language in the Second Temple period as an act of cultural resistance against Hellenistic influences (*Writing*, 253–62). Hellenism was already making inroads in the area of Judea in the mid-4th century and the date of this coin may show that using the Hebrew language as a strategy of cultural resistance originated before the Hasmonean period.

Hasmoneans. Even Nehemiah's text (together with Ezra's) was relegated to the canonical backwater of the *Ketubim*, while P's celebration of the Aaronide priesthood took pride of place at the center of the Torah. Later Second Temple literature allows one to estimate their literary influence: Nehemiah (person and book) does not appear in 1 Esdras or among the Dead Sea Scrolls; the latter include one fragmentary manuscript of Ezra. Ezra the scribe, however, does not appear in Ben Sira's review of "famous men," while Nehemiah does (49:13). By contrast, the Qumran library contained at least fifteen manuscripts of Leviticus in three different languages (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic) and countless references and allusions to its contents in other works. Many Second Temple period books include the celebration of the priesthood as a major theme (e.g., Ben Sira, *Jubilees*, *Testament of Levi*, *Aramaic Levi*, etc.).²² Though the books of Ezra and Nehemiah rightly play a decisive role in modern historical reconstructions of Persian-period Judea, their value as historical sources should not obscure the fact that, as texts, they seem to have had relatively little rhetorical influence in the Second Temple period itself. Most of the rhetoric preserved from the period does not celebrate the roles of governors and other imperial officials.

Aaronide priests led Samaritans and Jews from catastrophe and devastation in the 7th or 6th centuries B.C.E. to become populous, increasingly wealthy and influential temple communities by the late 3rd and 2nd centuries. The Seleucids and Romans would find Jews and Samaritans to be militarily troublesome, which is itself testimony to their power and how far Aaronide leadership had brought these communities in the preceding period. This record of accommodationist policies is in marked contrast to the nationalistic policies of Israel's and Judah's kings, and of the later Hasmonean rulers who took the high priesthood and, eventually, the royal title as well in their pursuit of independence. Though successful in the short term, their policy would fail to preserve Judea's independence and their dynasty in the 1st century B.C.E. In the following century, it led to national catastrophe. Contrary to modern presuppositions about the typical tendencies of theocracies, many powerful Aaronides showed considerable tolerance for foreigners and foreign ways, as exemplified by intermarriage between members of the Samaritan and Jewish priesthoods and by the priests' interest in Hellenistic culture.²³ These policies came under withering criticism from those advocating more exclusive perspectives.

22. See James Kugel, "Levi's Elevation to the Priesthood in Second Temple Writings," *HTR* 86 (1993) 1-63.

23. It was not just Jewish and Samaritan priests that consolidated their grasp on their offices and incomes by accommodating imperial overlords politically. A single Egyptian family controlled the high priesthood of Ptah in Memphis throughout the Ptolemaic period—a span of 13 high priests over 10 generations. By its loyal support of the Ptolemaic monarchs, this family capitalized on its strategic position near Alexandria in an ancient capital of Egypt to monopolize this supreme office

Of course, some of the high priests were complicit in more nationalistic ventures as well, and the more exclusive policies of leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah did not preclude their close cooperation with the Persian overlords. So the distinction I am drawing is not hard and fast. It is nevertheless notable that the priests' pursuit of a *modus vivendi* with imperial powers and/or ethnic neighbors earned them sharp criticism from those, like Ezra, Nehemiah, the Maccabees, the Qumran community and the Zealots, who claimed a divine mandate for policies of separation and exclusion. In the long run, however, the priests' pragmatism produced better results for the material and political welfare of Jews and Samaritans than did more confrontational policies, the military successes of the Hasmoneans notwithstanding. Though one looks in vain for an explicit defense of such accommodationist policies toward imperial powers in the Pentateuch or other Second Temple literature before Josephus, the Aaronide policies are probably responsible for the prominent preservation in the biblical canon of anti-nationalistic oracles by preexilic prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.²⁴ They almost certainly account for the absence of royal institutions and rhetoric from the Torah itself.

Obviously, I do not advance these reevaluations of the Aaronide record in hopes of reviving an outdated and discredited model of religious and political leadership. I share the critical perspectives of many modern ideologies on the dangers of theocracy. These critiques become anachronistic hindrances, however, when they subconsciously color historical evaluations of the Second Temple period. The Aaronides' record of promoting "biblical" religious standards and of using relatively tolerant policies to improve the well-being of their communities compares favorably with all of ancient Israel's alternative leadership models and experiences up to the end of the Second Temple period. Histories of the period need to reflect this record in order to produce more balanced interpretations of Aaronide rhetoric and its significance for religious history.²⁵

and its incomes. See Dorothy J. Thompson, "The High Priests of Memphis under Ptolemaic Rule," in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. Mary Beard and John North; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) 95-116.

24. Klawans noted, however, that Second Temple priests maintained a more inclusive cult than the cult advocated by Ezekiel and that this played a role in the relative importance of the latter's texts in this period: "We can safely assume that early Second Temple priests played some role in the canonization—and centralization—of Leviticus and Numbers and the relative ostracizing of Ezekiel 40-48." Contrary to the prevailing assumptions of biblical interpreters, he argued correctly: "Here we find anonymous priests defending what would strike us as just and good—openness and inclusion—against the vision of an exclusivist prophet" (*Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 74).

25. This paper is an abbreviated and revised version of an argument that appears in my *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 7. It is reproduced here by permission of Cambridge University Press.