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THE PRIESTLINESS OF ISRAEL:  
BECOMING AND BEING THE *~yphk tklmm*

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**Introduction**

In Exod 19:6, Yahweh declares that the Israelites whom he has delivered from slavery in Egypt will become his *hl qS* (treasured possession), his *~yvhk tkl mm*, and his *vwdq ywg* (holy nation). The precise meaning of the second of these expressions has been the subject of much debate.<sup>1</sup> The phrase is only found here and it has few parallel expressions elsewhere in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty is further increased by the ambiguity in the syntactical relationship between the two nouns. Some have interpreted the construct chain adjectivally, yielding either “priestly kingdom”<sup>3</sup> or, less frequently, “royal priesthood.”<sup>4</sup> Others prefer to let both nouns stand as substantives: “kings, priests,”<sup>5</sup> “a kingdom and priests”<sup>6</sup> or “a kingdom of priests.”<sup>7</sup>

The multiplicity of possible translations is matched by the variety of interpretations given to the phrase. William Propp classes these according to two main approaches: elitist and egalitarian.”<sup>8</sup> In the former, the priestliness expressed in Exod 19:6 refers to a particular class of people within Israel: “Israel is to be a holy nation ruled by (even holier) priests.”<sup>9</sup> Arie van der

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<sup>1</sup> See Arie van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests: Comment on Exodus 19:6,” in *The Interpretation of Exodus: Studies in Honour of Cornelis Houtman* (ed. Riemer Roukema; Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 171–79 for a summary of the various traditional suggestions and more recent proposals.

<sup>2</sup> One possible corollary is found in Isaiah 61:6 where the prophet declares that the people ‘shall be called the priests of the Lord.’

<sup>3</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 2a; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 157. This translation is also found in the NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19.6* (JSOTSup 395; London: T&T Clark, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> As in the various targums. See van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests,” 175.

<sup>6</sup> As in the Peshitta. See van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests,” 175.

<sup>7</sup> As in most modern English translations.

<sup>8</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 157.

<sup>9</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 157.

Kooij is typical of this viewpoint, concluding that the expression “not only suggests a state ruled by a king who is also priest, but also points to a powerful position of the (chief) priests of the temple.”<sup>10</sup> If this elitist interpretation is followed, then it becomes relatively easy to understand the nature of the priesthood in view. The cultic priests were just such an elite group with substantial power and influence over the nation.

In Propp’s assessment of recent scholarship, however, “most favor the alternative approach: *mamleket kōhānîm* and *gôy qādôš* cumulatively express the extreme sanctity of *all* Israel.”<sup>11</sup> The difficulty with this egalitarian view is the problem of in what sense all Israel may be described as priestly. Some have found the answer in Israel’s role with respect to the nations. Cassuto, for example, describes Israel as “a people comprised wholly of priests, a people that will occupy among humanity the place filled by the priests within each nation.”<sup>12</sup> Brevard Childs agrees that the priestly role is one of service to the nations, but he considers that this should be understood in a corporate sense, rather than attributing priesthood to all individual Israelites as Cassuto does. He thinks that the three expressions in Exod 19:5-6 (חלֵקֶם, תְּכַלְמֶם וְיִהְיֶה לְכֹהֲנֵיכֶם, and וְנִדְבַקְתֶּם יְיָ) should be interpreted together to explain Israel’s new status and role: Israel is God’s own people, set apart from the rest of the nations. Israel as a people is also dedicated to God’s service among the nations as priests function with a society. Finally, the life of Israel shall be commensurate with the holiness of the covenant God. The covenant responsibility encompasses her whole life, defining her relation to God and to her neighbors, and the quality of her existence.<sup>13</sup>

The problem with interpreting Israel’s priesthood in terms of service to or on behalf of the nations, is the lack of evidence in the immediate context of Exod 19:6 to support this. Davies points out that “the nearest reference to the nations in relation to Israel as an active agent in the

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<sup>10</sup> van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests,” 178.

<sup>11</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 158.

<sup>12</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 227.

<sup>13</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 367.

wider context is at Exod. 17.14-16, which concerns the obliteration of the memory of the Amalekites!”<sup>14</sup>

John Davies makes a useful and important distinction between “a *functional* definition of priesthood,”<sup>15</sup> on the one hand, and “an *ontological* one,” on the other.<sup>16</sup> He notes that all too often in the interpretation of *~yḥk tkl mm* it has been assumed “in most cases without feeling the need for any exegetical justification, that one must define priesthood in terms of what it is that priests *do*, particularly what it is they do in relation to other people.”<sup>17</sup> A typical example of this sort of interpretation is found in Nahum Sarna’s commentary: “the priest’s place and function within society must serve as the ideal model for Israel’s self-understanding of its role among the nations. The priest is set apart by a distinctive way of life consecrated to the service of God and dedicated to ministering to the needs of the people.”<sup>18</sup> For Sarna, the essence of priesthood is service of God and ministry to the people.

An egalitarian view of Israel’s priestliness is not necessarily committed to a functional definition of priesthood. John Hall Elliot thinks that “‘Kingdom of priests’ is a concrete example for the quality of holiness. Not priestly function but priestly character is weighted here.”<sup>19</sup> Jo Bailey Wells concurs, “priests represent a particular illustration of holiness in Israel.”<sup>20</sup> This quality of holiness is in view in Exod 19:6 as shown by the parallelism of the verse: the meaning of *~yḥk tkl mm* is made more explicit in its parallel phrase *vwdq ywq*.<sup>21</sup> In this view, the priestliness of Israel is defined as the nation’s holiness, seen in their separation out from the nations, just as the holiness of the cultic priests was seen in their separation from the rest of the

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<sup>14</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 97–98.

<sup>15</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 94–95.

<sup>16</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 97 (emphasis original).

<sup>18</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 104.

<sup>19</sup> John Hall Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy* (NovTSup 12; Leiden: Brill, 1966), 55–56.

<sup>20</sup> Jo Bailey Wells, *God’s Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (JSOTSup 305; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 63.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, *God’s Holy People*, 55.

people. Cornelis Houtman suggests that this separation was marked by particular requirements for obedience.<sup>22</sup> This interpretation thus also has the advantage of making a clear connection between the condition in Exod 19:5a and the consequences of keeping the condition in vv. 5b-6. If the people obey Yahweh and keep the covenant, the result will be their holiness, and by extension, their priestliness.

Related to the idea of priestliness defined in terms in holiness, is the priestly privilege of drawing near to Yahweh. For Wells, this is what constitutes the functional aspect of priesthood when she says, “the essence of the role of the priest is to draw near to Yhwh.”<sup>23</sup> Houtman agrees, but insists that this view of Israel’s holiness and access to God must be understood in corporate terms: “it is incorrect to conclude from ‘kingdom of priests’ that all Israelites, without distinction, like priests have access to God. The point is Israel’s unique position as a people in its entirety, not the position of the individual Israelite.”<sup>24</sup>

This brief summary indicates something of the scope of potential interpretations for the expression  $\sim\text{y}n\text{h}k \text{ tkl } m\text{m}$ . Elitist views interpret the priestly terminology as a reference to the cultic priesthood. Egalitarian views attribute it either to all Israelites, or to the nation as a corporate whole. The priestliness of Israel may be functional, usually interpreted as service to the nations, or ontological, describing Israel’s holiness and access to Yahweh. Previous studies which have focussed upon the semantic and syntactical analysis of the phrase in its immediate context have not succeeded in producing a consensus for its interpretation. In this paper we will adopt a different approach. We begin merely with the assumption that the description of Israel as  $\sim\text{y}n\text{h}k \text{ tkl } m\text{m}$  intends to make some statement about the nation as priestly.<sup>25</sup> This prompts us to investigate the portrayal of priesthood in the rest of the book and then to consider in what way

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<sup>22</sup> Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 2* (trans. Sierd Woudstra; Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1996), 445.

<sup>23</sup> Wells, *God’s Holy People*, 106–7.

<sup>24</sup> Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 2*, 446.

<sup>25</sup> It also says something about Israel’s royal status or kingdom status. For the purposes of this paper, however, our focus will be only on the priestliness of Israel indicated by the phrase.

this might be related to the nation as a whole. There are three groups of people in Exodus who are called priests or who are presented as priests (in addition to the description of the nation in Exod 19:6): Moses, who is portrayed as the archetypal priest; pre-Aaronide priests, including Jethro and unnamed Israelite priests; and the Aaronide priests whose institution is described in Exod 28-29. For the purposes of this paper, our examination will be restricted to the book of Exodus itself, though it should of course be noted that this forms part of a wider unit in the Pentateuch and there may be other nuances to the phrase  $\sim\text{nhk } \text{tkl } \text{mm}$  which would emerge from a broader study. Nonetheless we expect the more immediate context within the book of Exodus to be the most significant. We begin by examining the process of becoming a priest and then look at what it meant to be a priest.

### **Becoming $\sim\text{nhk } \text{tkl } \text{mm}$ : the Ordination Rite**

The ordination rite was the means by which priests were consecrated and set apart for their priestly role. In Exodus, this is described in the instructions given to Moses in chapters 28-29. The section begins with an automatic restriction on those permitted to enter the priesthood according to birth (Exod 28:1, cf. 28:43). Only Aaron and his sons could be consecrated in this way, in perpetuity.<sup>26</sup>

The first stage in the process was washing with water (Exod 29:4). Leithart notes that “few sanctifying rites existed in the Old Testament system and even fewer sanctifying ablutions. Most washings rendered the unclean clean..., but ordination included a bath that was part of a ‘consecration.’”<sup>27</sup> The washing is not explained but it is easy to see that how both illustrates and embodies the need for purity in the presence of God.

Following the purificatory washing, the priests were dressed for their role. They wore linen undergarments when they approached the tent (Exod 29:42-43), and were then dressed in

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<sup>26</sup> This may explain why the genealogy given in Exod 6 is more concerned to follow Aaron’s line than that of Moses. (Exod 6: 14-25).

<sup>27</sup> Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 110.

their official vestments. For Houtman, this process of putting on the priestly garments was fundamental in taking on the office of the priest, since “according to ancient thinking ‘the clothes make the man’. ... Wearing of the official costume transforms the wearer, turns him into an office bearer.”<sup>28</sup> The instructions for wearing the priestly clothing indicate just how seriously this process was taken:

Dressing and grooming of the cultic functionary must be impeccable, in conformity with YHWH’s regulations, lest the relationship between him and Israel, the cultic community, be disrupted. That threat must be warded off. Hence the severe sanctions on breaching the clothing ordinances. The penalty for it is death.<sup>29</sup>

Sarna concurs that the purpose of the priestly garments was, at least in part, to distinguish the priests from the people: “Just as sacred space must be differentiated from profane space, so the occupants of the sacred office must be distinguished from the laity. Hence, special attire, the insignia of office, is ordained for Aaron, the archetypal High Priest, and for his sons, the priests of lower rank.”<sup>30</sup> The priestly clothing also visibly and unmistakably linked the priests with the sanctuary. Menahem Haran notes that the priestly vestments “are considered an inseparable part of the tabernacle appurtenances.”<sup>31</sup> This was most obvious with respect to the high priest who was, as Peter Enns says, “decked out as the tabernacle itself.”<sup>32</sup>

The next stage of the process further aligns the priests with the sanctuary in which they serve. In Exod 28:41, Moses is instructed to anoint Aaron and his sons. Although the consecration rite only makes mention of the anointing of the high priest in Exod 29:7, it seems reasonable to assume that the other priests were also anointed as suggested in chapter 28. The garments of the high priests were anointed for their use through the generations (Exod 29:29-30),

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<sup>28</sup> Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 3* (trans. Sierd Woudstra; Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Kampen: Kok, 2000), 466.

<sup>29</sup> Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 3*, 467.

<sup>30</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, 1985), 59.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 530.

just as the altar was anointed for its consecration (Exod 29:36). Throughout these chapters, there is a strong link between anointing and consecration (vđq), that is to say, making holy.

Once the putative priests were washed, dressed, and anointed, the consecration proper could begin. Moses, as the officiant, brought a bull, two rams, and three different kinds of unleavened baked goods (Exod 29:1-2) to be offered on behalf of the priests. The first sacrifice was the sin offering (tāj x), in which the priests laid their hands on the bull before it was killed, its blood was smeared on the altar, and its innards were burned upon the altar (Exod 29:10-14). The first ram was then taken as a whole burnt offering (hl [) and a fire offering (hva). Again the priests laid hands on the ram, Moses killed it and threw its blood against the altar. The whole of the ram was burned on the altar, creating a pleasing fragrance to Yahweh (Exod 29:15-18).

The second ram is called the ram of ordination (-yal m lya, Exod 29:26). As before, the priests laid hands on the animal and Moses killed it. The blood of this ram was divided: part was used to mark the priests on their right ears, thumbs and toes; and the rest was thrown against the altar. The blood from the altar, mixed with the anointing oil, was then sprinkled over Aaron, his sons and all their garments. Sarna sees a parallel with a law given in Lev 14:14ff concerning purification after recovery from a skin disease by application of the blood. “There the ceremony has a purificatory function, and it most likely serves the same purpose here.”<sup>33</sup> Certainly the result of this sprinkling was that the garments and the priests were considered holy (Exod 29:19-21). Parts of this ram were taken together with some of the bread and waved in front of Yahweh before being burned in offering (hl [ and hva, Exod 29:22-25). The breast and leg of the ram were also waved in front of Yahweh, but were not burned. Following the sacrifices, these parts of the ram of ordination were eaten together with the rest of the bread, by the new priests. The holy priests feasted on the holy food (Exod 29:31-34). None of the food was to be kept and if any was left over, it had to be burned the next day.

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<sup>33</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 189.

The ordination process took seven days, with the sin offering repeated each day. As the priests were consecrated, so too was the altar and the sanctuary. Although Moses was the officiant, it was Yahweh who was ultimately responsible for the process of consecration. He declares, “I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests.” (Exod 29:46)

### **The Exodus Narrative as Ordination Rite**

As we have seen, priests had to be consecrated and ordained as such, through a complex ritual of purification, investiture, sacrifice, sprinkling with blood, and feasting. Israel’s journey to becoming *~yḥk tkl mm* through the book of Exodus shows a number of close parallels to this ordination rite. Sarna notes particularly the similarity between the use of the blood in covenant and ordination rituals but can find only the most general connection between the two events: “It is likely that in both these ceremonies - covenant and ordination - the blood functions mysteriously to cement the bond between the involved parties.”<sup>34</sup> Peter Leithart notices a more extensive reprise of the Sinai covenant in the ordination rite:

<i>Sinai Covenant</i>	<i>Ordination Rite</i>
Purify and wash clothes, Exod 19:10-14	Washing, investiture, anointing
Series of sacrifices, 24:1-8	Series of sacrifices
Feast on the mountain, 24:9-11	Feast in the holy place <sup>35</sup>

He concludes from this that “Yahweh entered, through the ordination rite, into a priestly covenant with Aaron and his sons.”<sup>36</sup> Propp, in the light of Exod 19:6, reads the parallel the

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<sup>34</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 152.

<sup>35</sup> Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 76.

other way, concluding that the encounter at Sinai should be understood as a “quasi-royal, quasi-priestly investiture.”<sup>37</sup>

Davies has examined this parallel in some detail, demonstrating how the events at Sinai may be construed as a process of ordination and much of the following section follows his analysis.<sup>38</sup> However, he limits his discussion to the events of Exod 19-24, whereas we shall argue that the ordination process begins much earlier in the Exodus narrative, at least with the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, and that it has echoes throughout the first half of the book.

### **Ancestry**

We noted that the first restriction placed upon the cultic priesthood was one of ancestry. The book of Exodus begins with a list of the twelve sons of Israel and most frequently refers to the Israelites as their descendants (l arfy ymb). There is a clear distinction made throughout the early chapters of the book between those of Israelite descent and the Egyptians who have enslaved them. Although one of Yahweh’s goals is for Pharaoh to know that he is Lord, the Egyptians are never invited to join the Israelites in service and worship to him. That role is restricted to those who are of Israelite descent,

### **Purification**

For Davies, the purification of the Israelites begins at the foot of Mount Sinai when they are instructed to wash their clothes and to abstain from sexual relations.<sup>39</sup> This process is called consecration (vmdq) in Exod 19:10. It does not explicitly mention bathing, though Sarna considers that this is taken for granted.<sup>40</sup> However, there is an earlier incident in the Exodus

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<sup>37</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 160. See also E. W. Nicholson, “The Covenant Ritual in Exodus XXIV 3–8,” *VT* 32, no. 1 (1982): 83–84.

<sup>38</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 103–36.

<sup>39</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 109ff.

<sup>40</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 105.

narrative that perhaps takes the place of the purificatory washing in the ordination rite. The presentation of the Israelites' escape through the Red Sea in Exod 15 suggests that this event should be understood as part of the process of consecration. In the Song of Moses, the journey through the waters of the sea is presented as the Israelites' journey of approach towards and entry into God's holy abode (Exod 15:13, 17). This fits the pattern of washing with water before entering the sanctuary.

### **Clothing**

Following their washing, the priests were next prepared for consecration by donning their priestly garments. The Israelites are not given new garments but they are instructed to wash their clothes. For Houtman, this is essential to the consecration process:

Important to remember is that in the mind of the ancients there was a relationship between clothing and wearer; removal of soiled clothing was tantamount to removal of personal uncleanness; but changing one's garments, putting on clean clothes, one becomes a different, a new person, the transference of garments constitutes transference of authority."<sup>41</sup>

Clean clothes were the very minimum requirement to stand in God's holy presence, for, as Cassuto notes, "the cleanness of the clothes would symbolize the inner purity of the soul."<sup>42</sup> By the end of Exod 19, then, the people are presented to Yahweh, appropriately washed and appropriately dressed, ready for the ordination ritual to begin.

### **Anointing**

The final stage of the preparation of the priests for their consecration was anointing with oil. We noted earlier that this, along with the specifics of the high priestly garments, had the particular function of identifying the priests with the tabernacle. The high priest would both look and smell like the place in which he served. There is no comparable anointing for the Israelite

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<sup>41</sup> Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 2*, 450.

<sup>42</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 229.

people and this may simply be because the sanctuary in which they serve, that is, the holy mountain, bears no particular scent.

### **Sacrifices**

The goal of the Israelites' departure from Egypt has been clear since Exod 3:13: they were to serve God on the holy mountain. The nature of this service was made more explicit in the applications that were made to Pharaoh: the Israelites wanted to hold a feast, making sacrifices to Yahweh (Exod 5:1-3). However, the first sacrifices described were made while the Israelites were still in Egypt, to protect them from Yahweh's destructive presence in the passover. These sacrifices were, in some way parallel to the sacrifices made in the ordination ritual, for they too had the effect of consecration (Exod 13:2). The same regulation regarding the destruction of any remaining food from the sacrificial meal also applied to the passover sacrifice (Exod 12:10).

The sacrifice made in Exod 24 even more clearly matches the ordination rite. There is no parallel to the sin offering, nor the first burnt offering of the ordination process. It is the ritual surrounding the ram of ordination which is matched by the ritual of Exod 24:5-8. In each case, the blood of the ram is divided, some being thrown on the altar and some sprinkled on the people. This ritual has traditionally been interpreted as a kind of ratification procedure for the covenant.<sup>43</sup> This interpretation is not without its limitations, as Kraus recognizes:

We cannot now say, for example, what part was played by the sprinkling of blood in the sacral act of ratifying a covenant. All we can be certain about it that the fellowship between Yahweh and his people which was preserved by the covenant found its direct and concrete expression in worship in the *Xbz*, by means of which the *communio* between the partners to the covenant was established.<sup>44</sup>

Nicholson offers a different perspective on the blood ritual, emphasizing the holiness of blood and its contagious consecrating property, able to make things and people holy:

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Cassuto, *Exodus*, 312.

<sup>44</sup> Hans Joachim Kraus, *Worship in Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1966), 120.

Prominent is the belief that blood is holy; that is why, for example, the blood of sacrificial victims is devoted to God. Further, blood conveys holiness to that with which it comes into contact. Thus, for example, it is used as part of the rite whereby Aaron and his sons are hallowed, consecrated as priests. Given this, an explanation of the ritual in Exod. xxiv 3ff. readily suggests itself: half the blood is thrown upon the altar, devoted to God, whilst the other half, so carefully noted as having been set aside, is cast over the assembled Israelites who are thereby consecrated as Yahweh's holy people. Thus, in addition to whatever else it entailed, the making of the covenant here was also a matter of Israel becoming Yahweh's holy people.<sup>45</sup>

Davies is more explicit even than this. The consecration of Israel as God's holy people is to be interpreted as their ordination into the priesthood:

As we have been expecting some kind of priestly inauguration of the whole congregation of Israel, it is difficult to escape the fact that the double application of blood to the altar (representing Yhwh) and to the people constitutes such a rite. The people have in effect undergone something analogous to an 'ordination' to set them apart as belonging to Yhwh as his royal priesthood.<sup>46</sup>

It should be noted that the two perspectives on the ritual described here are not mutually exclusive. We do not have to decide whether the sacrifice and blood-sprinkling were covenant ratification *or* priestly consecration; both connotations may have been intended.

## Feasting

Following the sacrifices and blood-sprinkling, the newly-consecrated priests shared in a feast. The meal following the sacrifices in Exod 24 is usually construed as a covenant meal.<sup>47</sup> However, in the pattern we have observe it may also have served as the consecration meal, eaten by the newly ordained priests in the presence of Yahweh. Not every Israelite individually took part in this meal but the seventy elders may be presumed to be representative of all Israel.

## Summary

We agree with Davies in his assessment that "a deliberate typology is being established."<sup>48</sup> The pattern of ordination given for the cultic priesthood can be seen to apply to

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<sup>45</sup> Nicholson, "Covenant Ritual," 83.

<sup>46</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 121–22.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 123.

the whole nation within the wider narrative. While this ritual is centered on the events at Sinai described in chapters 19-24, there are elements of the priestly consecration rite found throughout the book. The closest link is seen in the blood ritual following the sacrifices, but the elements of ancestry, purification, clothing and feasting are also evident. The story of Exodus is, in one respect, the story of Israel becoming *~yḥk tkl mm* through a process that mirrors the ordination ritual for the cultic priesthood. Of course this is not the only story that is being told and it should not be thought that this interpretation diminishes the more familiar themes of deliverance, election, covenant and so on. This view does, however, suggest that the elitist interpretation of *Mynhk tkmmm* does not do justice to the portrayal of Israel in Exodus. The whole people are included in the priestly consecration and thus we expect the whole people to have something of the priestly quality and privilege.

### **Being *~yḥk tkl mm***

If the ordination rite provides the model for Israel's process of becoming *~yḥk tkl mm*, then we would expect the status and role of the cultic priesthood to provide the model for Israel's status and function as *~yḥk tkl mm*. In the book of Exodus, the Aaronide priesthood is not yet active. We will be able to gain some understanding of the nature of priesthood from the description of the priestly garments and the ordination rite given in Exod 28-29. However, the book does give us another model for understanding priesthood in the person of Moses, the archetypal priest. It is Moses who is given the task of consecrating Aaron and his sons, and that priestly role in the cult is supported by the presentation of Moses throughout the book as one who has unprecedented access to the divine presence. Before we examine these two models for priesthood, we shall first briefly consider those priests mentioned in the book of Exodus who do not fall into these categories: Jethro, the priest of Midian; and the pre-Aaronide Israelite priests.

### **Pre-Aaronide priests**

The first person to be called a priest in the book of Exodus is not an Israelite at all. Moses' father in law, Jethro, is a priest of Midian. No explanation is given as to his status or role as a priest in Midian and it is far from certain which god Jethro served. Propp suggests that, "since [Jethro] resides near Mount Horeb, confesses Yahweh's greatness and leads Israel in sacrifice, the biblical authors probably considered him a Yahweh-worshiper,"<sup>49</sup> though this should certainly not be taken as a judgment regarding the worship of the historical Jethro. When Jethro visits Moses among the Israelites in chapter 18, and learns that Yahweh is the greatest of all gods, he offers sacrifices and eats a meal in God's presence (Exod 18:12). For Houtman, the recurrent use of the term "father-in-law" in this section indicates that "Jethro was present among Israel in that role and not as a priest."<sup>50</sup> In any event, there is simply not enough evidence in the book of Exodus to draw any firm conclusions concerning the nature of Jethro's priesthood.<sup>51</sup>

There were also priests among the Israelites even before the institution of the Aaronide priesthood. They were probably the heads of households who took on cultic responsibilities within the clans.<sup>52</sup> These priests are mentioned in Exod 19 where they are described as "those who come near to the Lord" (*hwhy-l a -yvgnh*, Exod 19:22). For Davies, this description constitutes "the virtual definition of what it is to be a priest."<sup>53</sup>

### Moses as the archetypal priest

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<sup>49</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 171.

<sup>50</sup> Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 2*, 410.

<sup>51</sup> Houtman feels that it would be "attractive to think of him as a *kâhin* known among pre-Islamic Arabians, a seer, a soothsayer who, often in a state of ecstasy, uttered oracles, and was regarded as the mouthpiece of the deity. He also functioned as the leader in raids on two hostile tribes. This understanding of the priest of Midian is burdened with two problems: the lack of Old Testament data and the fact that the data on the *kâhin* are from a much later time." Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 1* (trans. Johan Rebel, Woudstra; Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1993), 307.

<sup>52</sup> See Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 98.

Nowhere in the book of Exodus is Moses given the title of priest. However, there are a number of ways in which the narrative of the book portrays him as the archetypal priest: the priestly commissioning at the burning bush; his access to the presence of Yahweh; his mediatorial role between Yahweh and the people; and his role in the consecration of the Aaronide priests.

### **Commissioning at the burning bush.**

In chapter 3 we are given the first indication of the kind of privileged status Moses holds with respect to God. He is commanded to approach a place that has sanctuary status,<sup>54</sup> as indicated in the passage by the presence of the Lord<sup>55</sup> and its designation as holy ground. Moses is first summoned into God's presence and then warned not to come closer. Wells points out that "there is need for caution, respect and an 'access permit' where God is so intensely present. He is not to be encountered lightly. In each incidence relating to God's presence, rules are laid down."<sup>56</sup> Here, the rule is that Moses must remove his sandals, for he is standing on holy ground. The removal of his sandals may be indicative of a priestly role as well as humility in the presence of the divine:

In the ancient Near East, removal of footwear, here probably sandals of papyrus or leather, was a sign of respect and displayed an attitude of humility. Priests officiated barefoot in the sanctuary; and to this day they remove their footwear before pronouncing the priestly benediction in the synagogue service.<sup>57</sup> Davies also suggests that the removal of sandals is an indication that Moses is to consider the holy ground as "home". Later, the Israelites are instructed to eat the passover meal with belts fastened, sandals on their feet, and staffs in hand.

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<sup>54</sup> "Even in the absence of a surrounding structure, the vicinity of the Burning Bush is like a temple, the very ground is sacred." Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 200.

<sup>55</sup> Though the passage speaks of the appearance of the angel of the Lord, it is clear that Yahweh himself is present. See Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 1*, 335–36.

<sup>56</sup> Wells, *God's Holy People*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 15.

(Exod 12:11). These directions indicate that preparations for a journey included putting on sandals, which were thus presumably not commonly worn indoors. Moses, while he was working as a shepherd, would naturally have been wearing sandals,<sup>58</sup> but the act of removing them is a sign that he is not going anywhere. Just as the priests were at home in the sanctuary, so Moses is at home on this holy ground.

The encounter at the burning bush is most commonly recognised as Moses' prophetic commissioning because of the parallels with later prophetic calls and the prophetic task he is given of speaking God's words to Pharaoh and the Israelites. However, Davies thinks that "there are also elements of a *priestly* commissioning about the burning bush narrative."<sup>59</sup> The sanctuary access is not typical of a prophetic ministry, but a priestly one. Even the task which Moses is given has a priestly element: he is to lead the people out of Egypt to sacrifice to Yahweh, and to serve him on the mountain, which is to say, in the sanctuary.

### **Entry into the presence of Yahweh.**

This event was only the first in a series of episodes in which Moses enters the presence of Yahweh. In chapter 19, Moses ascends the mountain to meet with God, while the people remain at the bottom. In chapter 24, Moses first ascends with the seventy elders into the presence of God, though the references to God's feet and to the pavement indicate that there is still some distance between them and Yahweh. Moses is then called to go up on the mountain alone where he enters the cloud of God's glory. Following the incident of the golden calf, Moses is granted the most direct access any human being can be given to the divine presence when he is permitted to stand in the presence of the Lord's glory (Exod 33:20-23). This intimate access to the Lord

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<sup>58</sup> "Especially for the shepherd sandals are very important. They protect his feet against the heat and the cold of the ground, against the sharp stones and the briars (sic) in the desert (cf. Deut. 29:5). Normally sandals were not worn inside the home. So the putting on of sandals indicated readiness for a journey." Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 1*, 335–36.

<sup>59</sup> Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 105.

continues in the tent of meeting (Exod 33:7-11; 34:34-35). Throughout the book, then, it is made clear that Moses has unique access to the presence of Yahweh. For Wells this is the most significant factor in identifying Moses as a priest: “The essence of the role of the priest is to draw near to Yhwh. Thus Moses is depicted as the ultimate priest.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Mediation between Yahweh and the people.**

Moses’ access to Yahweh serves a number of purposes. Most frequently in the book of Exodus, Yahweh speaks to Moses, often giving him a message to relay to others. In chapters 32-34, however, we see a different dynamic in this relationship when Moses pleads with Yahweh to show mercy to the people. He reminds God of the promises he has made in claiming the people for his own and thus persuades God to avert his wrath (Exod 33:12-23).

### **Consecrating the Aaronide priests.**

The final aspect of Moses’ priestly role is seen in relation to the Aaronide priests. They must be made holy for their service of Yahweh. Moses is able to perform this rite because he himself has already been consecrated. He is holy and is can perform the rituals that will declare the next generation of priests holy. Future generations of priests must be consecrated by priests; this first generation of priests must be consecrated by Moses, the archetypal priest.

### **Summary: Moses, the priest.**

Moses is commissioned to a priestly role in his first encounter with God. He is given unprecedented access into the divine presence. He mediates between God and the people. He consecrates other priests. Propp suggests that the title of priest is not used because Moses’ role is not restricted to that of a priest: he is also a prophet and a judge.<sup>61</sup> He leads the people in every

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<sup>60</sup> Wells, *God’s Holy People*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 231.

respect. Nonetheless, it is as a priest that he is able to fulfill his most important task: bringing the people into God's presence to serve him and to worship him (Exod 3:12, 18)

### **The model of the Aaronide priests**

The selection and consecration of the Aaronide priests is mandated in the book of Exodus but not implemented until the book of Leviticus, which outlines in far greater detail the priestly duties. There are, however, a number of things we can learn about the nature of priesthood from the detailed descriptions of the priestly garments and from the ordination rite as they are outlined in Exodus. As observed earlier, the high priestly garments closely resemble the tabernacle furnishings, and this connection is further heightened when both are anointed with oil, and both are sprinkled with the sacrificial blood. In some sense, then, the priest is identified with the tabernacle: both are consecrated by Yahweh. This suggests that the priest is, above all things, holy. This is made plain in the engraving upon the headdress of the high priest:  $\text{vwdq hwhyl}$  (Holy to the Lord). The holiness of the high priest, like that of the altar, is contagious (Exod 28:38; 29:37). Whatever guilt or profanity is attached to the gifts brought by the people may be borne by the high priest. His holiness will render the gifts acceptable to God.

The high priest's ephod is embellished with two onyx stones, one on each shoulder, engraved with the names of the Israelite tribes. Aaron is to wear the ephod in order to "bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for remembrance" (Exod 28:12). His breastpiece, called the breastpiece of judgment ( $\text{j pvmh !vx}$ ), is likewise adorned with stones, each named according to the names of the sons of Israel. Again, Aaron wears this in order to "bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord" (Exod 28:29). These two garments indicate that the priest's role was to bring the people into remembrance in the presence of God. Just as Moses interceded for the people in Exod 33 reminding Yahweh of his covenant relationship with them, the priest wore the names of the tribes in Yahweh's presence as a reminder of the people for God. The priest thus stands in the divine presence as the people's representative: "The names of all the tribes engraved on the gems and affixed to his vestments serve as a perpetual and

humbling reminder of the high Priest's role as the representative of the entire community of Israel before God."<sup>62</sup>

### Israel as *~yhk tklmm*

Our examination of the different models of priesthood in the book of Exodus helps us to form a picture of Israel's status as *~yhk tklmm*. Priests are those who are characterised by holiness and who are therefore able to draw near to Yahweh. Elliott expresses this in terms of relationship: "it is commonly recognized that a priest at all stages of religious consciousness is one who enjoyed a special intimate relationship with his god. The priest in Israel had free access to his God and shared in the accordant benefits of such nearness. He was holy "from among" the others and participated in the holiness of his holy God."<sup>63</sup> Wells puts the emphasis on holiness both as the characteristic quality of the priests and as their special charge in society:

I have argued that priests represent a particular illustration of holiness in Israel: they are consecrated and as such they are seen to belong to Yhwh in a special way. In consequence priests are set aside to serve him and to take special responsibility for holiness, both protecting the people from it and encouraging them to it.<sup>64</sup>

The story of the Exodus narrative clearly demonstrates Israel's special, intimate relationship with Yahweh, the God of the whole world. In this sense, Israel is rightly described as priestly. They are a holy nation from among the nations who are consecrated by Yahweh and belong to him in a special way. Israel's holiness is certainly prominent in Exod 19:6 where the expression *tklmm ~yhk* is paralleled by the phrase *vwdq ywq*.

Priestliness is more than holiness, however. It also connotes an extraordinary degree of access to the divine presence. This was seen most clearly in the archetypal priesthood of Moses, but also in the privileges of access granted to the Aaronide priests. Indeed this freedom to draw near to Yahweh was in some ways the defining feature of priesthood (Exod 19:22). The Exodus narrative is driven by the movement of the Israelite people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, where

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<sup>62</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 179.

<sup>63</sup> Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy*, 55.

<sup>64</sup> Wells, *God's Holy People*, 63.

they meet with Yahweh. Sarna correctly observes that “Mount Sinai assumes the character of a sanctuary for the duration of the theophany,”<sup>65</sup> and although the people are not all granted the same degree of access, all are present within the sanctuary courts. The whole people is addressed at Mount Sinai and this privileged access to the divine presence is perpetuated by the tabernacle, of which Yahweh declares: “There I will meet with the people of Israel... I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God.” (Exod 29:43, 45-46).

The third aspect of priesthood evidenced in the book of Exodus is the mediatorial role. Both Moses and the Aaronide priests had the task of representing the people in the divine presence. Here it is hard to see that there is any evidence for Israel as a whole having this function. There is no token of identification between Israel and the nations whom they might be supposed to represent. There is nothing which the Israelites can bring into Yahweh’s presence as a remembrance of the nations. Indeed, there is no covenant relationship with the nations which they might be supposed to be reminding Yahweh of. This kind of functional interpretation of the expression *~yḥk tkl mm* can only be externally imposed upon the text; we have found no support for it within the book of Exodus.

Rather, Israel is presented as a royal priesthood, a nation corporately consecrated through the due process of ordination: purification by water; clothing in appropriate dress; sacrifices and sprinkling with blood; and feasting in the presence of Yahweh. This is a holy nation, set apart from the other nations, just as the priests were set apart from ordinary Israelites. They enjoyed an extraordinary privilege of access to the divine presence and it is in these respects that Israel should be understood to be *~yḥk tkl mm*.

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<sup>65</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 105.

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