

NOTES ON THE ISRAELITE PRIESTHOOD AND ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN P AND H

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1. Patriarchal period: 1700-1250. God reveals himself to Abraham and calls him from “Ur of the Chaldeans,” which means “Babylon.”
2. A historically-significant group of Semites –the future “Israelites”—leave Egypt around 1250 and join other invaders of the “Holy Land,” “Canaan.” Genealogies will be created which will make them into twelve tribes, all sons of Jacob (Abraham’s grandchild) who is also named “Israel.”
3. Moses, the great figure associated with the Exodus from Egypt, was of Levitical stock. Thus the “Levites” are an old priesthood traceable to the days in Egypt.
4. Israel as a group of tribes takes over much of Canaan. “Judges” rule them at first, without a king. Then, with the new sedentary, farming life and the growth of their cities, Israel begins to have kings.
5. We can suppose that there were priestly cults (mainly animal sacrifices) going back to the nomad days; e.g., Jethro in Exod 2:16; 18:12. Melchizedek was another ancient priest from the days of Abraham, Gen 14:17-20.
6. Melchizedek, as his name indicates, was associated with Zedek, perhaps a Canaanite and Jebusite deity or divinized attribute of a deity (“El,” “God”). Jerusalem was a Jebusite city before David conquered it, 2 Sam 5:6-8.
7. Yahweh was the name of the God of the Patriarchs, Exod 6:2-3. He was associated with an Ark, and Shiloh (a north-central Levitical shrine) was his main sanctuary until the Ark was brought south to Zion. It seems that Zadokite priests (traceable to Jebusite Jerusalem) were in charge of the cult in Zion. Aaron, Moses’ “brother,” was made into the head of the Zadokites (who can also be called “Aaronides” as the Mosaic Levitical priests can also be known as “Mushites,” from Moses). See Frank Moore Cross’ classic *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973), esp. pp. 195-215, for more information on this.
8. David unified the twelve tribes (not an easy task, and they didn’t stay united for long) and made his capital near the center, Jerusalem. As part of this unification strategy, he named two high priests, Abiathar (Levitical, northern) and Zadok (Zadokite, southern).
9. When David died, there was a struggle for succession to his throne, and his son Solomon won out. Abiathar had backed the “wrong horse,” 1 Kgs 2:1-35, and was

banished to Anathoth. Only Zadok was high priest now. Anathoth would be the “exile city” of defrocked Levitical priests, 1 Kgs 2:26, like Jeremiah, Jer 1:1.

10. The Zadokite cult is what we know as the priestly (P) cult. It was originally centered on the sanctuary and concerned with “purity,” certain conditions which should be maintained in order to not disturb relations with the deity. This ethicless cult led to abuses denounced especially by the eight-century prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah. Isaiah of Jerusalem may be a more complex issue, since he has ties to the southern priesthood.

11. In the north, there were Levitical circles which harshly protested against the ethicless cult and social injustice. These circles are the forerunners of the Deuteronomic movement (D). They came south after the fall of the north.

12. As Friedman will tell you, two kings were important in different ways for P and D. Around 700, Hezekiah favored P, the Zadokites. Around 622, Josiah favored D, the Levitical priests associated with Deuteronomy. By this time, the P movement itself had evolved, in response to the harsh criticism of the eight-century prophets.

13. This evolution in P is represented by H, the “Holiness School.” They extend the concern of the deity, now certainly known as “Yahweh,” to outside the confines of the temple to the Land, and incorporate strong ethical concerns. This is best exemplified by Lev 17-26, known as the “Holiness Code,” which gives the name to this “school” and which comes from the refrain “Be holy because I, Yahweh your God, am holy.” It is this section of the Bible that has “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) and this love obligation extends to the “resident alien” (Lev 19:34). The Jubilee emancipation legislation is found in Lev 25. Lev 26 speaks of a broken covenant (as opposed to the classic P eternal, unconditional and unbreakable covenant) as occurs in D, with blessings and curses similar to those in D (but not the same as in Deut 28).

14. The Pentateuch will be a compromise between P (including H) and D. D will continue from Deuteronomy into the Deuteronomic History (Joshua-Kings), and the D movement will edit the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve). Note that the Sadducees (probably successors of the Zadokites) largely reject the Prophets (they accept only the Torah; see Jesus’ discussion with them in Mark 12:18-27; and Acts 23:1-11).

15. In the Babylonian Exile and thereafter (Ezek 44), the Zadokites consolidated their hegemony over the priesthood, with support from the Persian empire. The mission of Ezra was key here, Ezra 7. Judaism in the Second Temple period would see tensions

between the various priestly factions. The Sadducees would continue the tradition of close working relationships with the ruling imperial (foreign) power, but their role would end with the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E.=A.D.

15. One could trace a line from the Levitical circles to the Deuteronomic movement to Pharisaic circles and then to the rabbis, who gave Judaism today its shape (it is known as “rabbinic Judaism”). They do not focus on the temple like the Sadducees, but on Torah study (no animal sacrifice, the specialty of Jewish priests), like the “scribes.”

Additional Information on P and H

1. According to Jacob Milgrom (a great rabbi scholar who differs from Richard Elliott Friedman), P is a very old source. It was concerned only with the sanctuary and ritual, not with ethics. Purity affected only the sanctuary, and impurity was remedied by ritual acts.

2. In the eighth century, prophetic critique of an ethicless cult resulted in the Holiness Source (H), a priestly source which stressed ethics (behavior) and its consequences on not just the sanctuary, but also the Land. There was no ritual available to clean the Land; exile was the only remedy after a saturation point, and return to the Land was possible only after sufficient time had passed.

3. Unlike the prophets and D, H has no concept of *shuv*, conversion as the condition for return to the Land. The only response the people can have is remorse, confession of guilt and acceptance of punishment. There is no program of repentance (*shuv*) accompanied by behavior that will bring on the return from exile (as in D and the prophets). The people can only wait in exile the time it takes for the Land to get over its indigestion; they cannot hasten this process.

4. H is an eighth century “source,” responsible for Lev 17-27. Lev 1-15 is P (earlier). Lev 16, Yom Kippur, is from some other origin, not P or H, according to Milgrom.

5. D is probably from around 700 at the earliest, that is, more in the seventh century (later than H).