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Priestly Leadership in the Book of Leviticus: A Hidden Agenda

1 Preliminary Remarks

The Book of Leviticus is not about leadership. It does not establish a single person as a political or even spiritual leader, nor does such a person or a group expressly claim the leadership of the people. Such a direct claim would create a blatant anachronism and contradict the narrative setting, as the people of Israel rests at Mount Sinai, and Moses functions as leader and transmitter of divine revelation. However, it would be naïve to ignore that this scenery is a fictitious embedding for the priestly authors' concepts of the cult, the sanctuary, the sacrifices, holiness, purity, atonement, and, last but not least, leadership. The priestly claim for leadership of the community does not figure explicitly in the text, but it emerges indirectly, almost unnoticed, but even more irrefutable and overwhelming in its subtlety.¹

In this paper, I intend to demonstrate how the priests make themselves more and more indispensable for the religious and spiritual life of the people. As one cannot separate this aspect from other aspects of life in antiquity, the priests firmly establish their role, office, income, and influence without claiming it directly and expressly. Lev 10 is a bit of an exception to this rule, as this chapter more explicitly develops the roles, tasks, and competences of the priests. Within the group of the priests one priest attains a special marker, the anointment – first Aaron, but then always only one of his sons as his direct successor. Only this anointed priest plays a crucial role in a crucial service once a year (Lev 16). This particular constellation is an ideal point of departure for the expansion of leadership into various categories in the course of history, at least regarding the claim to leadership in other areas than religious affairs. Furthermore, one should never forget the economy. The priestly authors of Leviticus know that very well and thus they establish the unshakeable protection of their economic status in a fascinat-

¹ I noticed this phenomenon repeatedly when working on my commentary in the HThKAT series, but in this genre, when commenting bit by bit, it is not possible to expound it sufficiently. Hence, I am very grateful for the invitation of the editors of this volume, Katharina Pyschny and Sarah Schulz, to elaborate the topic of leadership – in the case of the Book of Leviticus, priestly leadership – in more detail.

ing way.² Finally, some further thoughts about the relationship between privileges and responsibilities, and between holiness and leadership end this contribution, before a conclusion will try to summarize the overall picture of leadership in Leviticus. However, already at this point of the study, one has to keep in mind that the Book of Leviticus was written by a specific religious elite, the priests, and that we can only get the *demands* they made and the rights they asserted by this piece of literature. Hence, the points of leadership elaborated in the following refer primarily to the world of the text and thus do not necessarily imply that the priests were able to implement their concept in reality.

2 The Indispensable Priest

2.1 Sacrifices (Lev 1–9)

In the descriptions of the sacrifices and their rituals, the priests draw an invisible line between the tasks and competences of the offering people and the priestly prerogatives. The priests do not expressly mention this border; it rather emerges from the portrayal of the proceedings. The person who wants to offer an animal as a burnt offering (see Lev 1) can be a man or a woman. S/he brings the animal and lays her/his hand on it to indicate that the offering happens on her/his behalf. Then s/he slaughters it, flays it, and cuts it into pieces. Later on, s/he washes the inner organs and shanks with water. As soon as parts of the animal are to approach the altar, the priests intervene: They handle the blood by splashing it on all sides of the altar and they arrange the pieces of the animal on top of the wood on the altar. In general, only the priests have the authority to take care of the wood and the fire on the altar. Finally, *the* priest, i.e., an identifiable individual priest among all officiating priests in the sanctuary (who will get the hide of the animal, see Lev 7:8), will burn the offering on the altar (Hieke 2014, 178). Regarding the other offerings, the distribution of tasks and competences is very much the same. The priestly prescriptions neither permit lay people to handle the blood of the slaughtered animals nor the lay Israelites to approach the altar. Thus,

² The priests of the Hebrew Bible get a bad reputation for that in the scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth century exegesis; see Blenkinsopp 1995, 66–68, who quotes a harsh critique of the dominant priest class at the Second Temple by Julius Wellhausen. More than a century after Wellhausen, Blenkinsopp rightly suggests moving beyond such prejudicial judgments (Blenkinsopp 1995, 90).

the priests are indispensable for the sacrificial cult – without them, the connection between the people and God via the cult would not work.

2.2 Unclean vs. Clean (Lev 11–14)

According to Lev 10:10, the priests have the task “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean”.³ They also have to teach the Israelites accordingly (10:11). Both aspects become extremely relevant in Lev 11–15. According to Lev 11, the common Israelite has to know about the animals that are forbidden for food. Furthermore, s/he needs to understand that touching the carcass of a dead animal renders one ritually unclean, and s/he gets information what measures one must take to become clean again. According to Lev 15, men and women need to know what to do when they have a bodily discharge, be it abnormal or normal. Hence, the priests’ teaching is vital for the ritual cleanness of the entire people. Without their teaching, the people eventually would violate heavily the lethal border between the holy (the realm of God) and the unclean (the realm that may not be exposed to the holy under all circumstances; Hieke 2014, 125–126).

In the case of skin diseases, fungal infections of fabrics and leather, and fungal infections of houses, the priests play an even more prominent role. Abnormal phenomena on surfaces – be it human skin, fabrics, leather, or walls – look like decay and thus remind of the sphere of death. Thus, people get worried about these phenomena. To prevent them from panicking and arbitrarily ostracizing individuals affected with some sort of skin disease, the priests claim the prerogative to be the only ones to decide about “clean” (the normal case) or “unclean” (the temporary exclusion from the cult and, in the case of skin diseases, from the community, see Lev 13:45–46). The priests are indispensable for coping with the mentioned phenomena reasonably. They keep up peace and order within the community. For that purpose, they need a high standard of knowledge beyond the average Israelite and thus a special training for their tasks (Blenkinsopp 1995, 99–101).

³ All quotations from Scripture follow the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise indicated.

2.3 The Anointed Priest in Lev 16

The major task of the priestly concept in the Book of Leviticus is to keep heaven on earth (see Hundley 2011), in other words, to maintain the divine presence granted by the sacrificial cult in the sanctuary. Various shortcomings of human beings and the closeness of death in the processes of human nature endanger this divine presence and defile the people and the sanctuary. The offerings described in Lev 4–5 take care for inadvertently committed sins and make atonement during the year. However, they do not cover all cases and *all sorts of sins*. Thus, the priests developed a unique and complex ritual to purge the sanctuary from all forms of uncleanness of the people of Israel and to make atonement for all transgressions, i.e., *all their sins* – once a year. Within the text of Lev 16, one can see a development from an emergency ritual for cleaning the sanctuary to a comprehensive complex of various rites and rituals that provides a general reconciliation at a certain day within one year (Nihan 2007, 340–379).

Within this complex ritual, the anointed priest (“The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father’s place”, Lev 16:32) plays a crucial role. In the later tradition, the one anointed priest as successor of Aaron becomes the “high priest” and highly influential in the post-exilic community, especially in the Hellenistic and Roman Era (see below). The high priest is the only one allowed to enter the Holy of Holies once a year to sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed bull and goat seven times toward the *kapporēt*. This is the place above the Ark of the Covenant where Yahweh grants his presence and thus the final contact for ultimate atonement (*kipper*). The high priest is also the only one who confesses “all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins” over a living goat, putting them with his both hands on the head of the goat and sending it into the wilderness (Lev 16:21). In doing so, the high priest becomes the indispensable tool and medium for the indispensable act of reconciliation and atonement once a year. Stemming already from an educated elite (see Lev 10), the anointed priest is predestined for leadership by his office.

3 Lev 10 as the Agenda of Priestly Leadership

3.1 A Warning First: Misunderstanding and Abuse

I already mentioned Lev 10 as the crucial chapter for the agenda of priestly leadership (Watts 2013, 505). However, before the text codifies the conduct of the priests, it utters a severe warning in a narrative manner. The successful inaugu-

ration of the cult in the preceding chapters and the detailed description of the rituals and their effects (and effectiveness) bear the danger of a misunderstanding and hence a source of abuse. The priests may fall for the temptation to manipulate the deity magically by inventing religious rituals and to impress the people by making a big fuss with frankincense and fire. This is at least what the people and the priests should learn from the dire fate of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. They offered unholy fire, such as Yahweh had not commanded them. In other words: they invented some religious practice, some ritual – maybe on their own behalf, maybe for their spiritual arrogance, maybe for their economic profit. The text does not specify the motives of the two priests, but it clearly warns the priests of creating additional rituals and abusing their position to tamper with the divine prescriptions. Hence, the priests are well aware of the dangers of their position and of the fact that their leadership will last permanently only if they stick to the accepted order of Yahweh.

3.2 Decide (Give *Torah*) and Teach

The priests need a sober mind; thus, they may not drink any intoxicating beverages when they execute their major tasks summarized in Lev 10:8–11: (1) “go to the tent of meeting”, i.e., officiating at the altar and offering (burning) the offerings of the people. (2) “Distinguish between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean” – this refers to the handling of the sacrificial gifts that become holy at a certain moment during the ritual and to the decisions in the case of skin diseases and other phenomena of everyday life that might cause ritual uncleanness. (3) “Teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them through Moses” – this refers to all those cases in which the Israelites have to decide for themselves about clean and unclean, e.g., which food is permitted and when does bodily discharge lead to a certain time of ritual uncleanness. Thus, securing the contact with the deity, distinguishing between access or not-access to the cult (and thus to the deity), and teaching about the conditions for approaching the deity are clearly tasks of leadership. In a society that eminently depends on an effective relationship to the deity – which is crucial for almost all societies in antiquity – the priests occupy a key position (Watts 2013, 506–507, 537).

3.3 High Responsibility

The priests have a high degree of responsibility. The relationship between the people of Israel and Yahweh rests in their hands: “the responsibility of the priest

is to ensure the survival of the relationship between God and the people” (Bibb 2007, 85).

However, the prophetic literature is full of instances where the prophets criticize the priests for their failure and corruption in these matters. The classical passage is Mal 2:1–9, especially verses 7–9:

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.

Further examples are Jer 2:8,26; 6:13; 8:10; 13:13; 18:18; Isa 28:7; Ezek 22:26; Hos 4:4–6; 6:9; Mich 3:11; Zeph 3:4 (see, e.g., Blenkinsopp 1995, 83, 89). Other passages remind of God’s sovereignty to overthrow the mighty and to humiliate all institutions of human leadership: counsellors, kings, priests, elders, princes, see Job 12:17–21; Ezek 7:26–27 (Boers 2015, 89).

3.4 Latest Chapter in Leviticus

According to Nihan (2007, 576–607), Lev 10 marks the editorial closure of the Book of Leviticus (with the exception of the appendix in Lev 27). From the viewpoint of priestly leadership in the Book of Leviticus, this diachronic presumption becomes plausible. At the editorial closure of the book, one finds a clear description of the priestly tasks in the middle, a severe warning at the beginning, and a lucid example of Aaron’s (the priest’s) competence to decide doubtful cultic cases at the end of the chapter. In the discussion about the sin offering’s meat in the case of the extraordinary event of the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron decided to burn the meat entirely instead of eating it. Moses, who first objected to that procedure, finally accepts Aaron’s decision. This fictitious “event” is not so much a single episode in a past far away, but rather an exemplary narrative about the halakhic competence of the priests: “Aaron”, the priest, the executor of the law, predominates “Moses”, the human lawgiver. Nihan is right when he calls this chapter “the founding legend of the priestly tradition of Scripture’s interpretation and commentary” (Nihan 2007, 605). Thus, the priests also claim leadership on the field of the exegesis of scripture (Watts 2013, 516–520).

4 Lev 16: The Anointed Priest in His Unique Role

4.1 *Primus Inter Pares* (Lev 8:7–9,12; Lev 4:3; Lev 21:10; Num 35:25–28; Sir 45:6–26)

It was already mentioned that “the anointed priest” according to Lev 16:32 fills an indispensable role in the ritual of the Day of Atonement. The unique task that is crucial for the people’s relationship to their god Yahweh is the subtle basis for a claim for leadership by the later so-called high priest. Another passage in Leviticus singles out an individual priest from the “sons of Aaron” as *the* one and only successor of his father. During the process of the ordination of the priests, Moses dresses Aaron with special and unique robes: the tunic, the sash, the ephod, the breastpiece (*hošāen*) with the Urim and Thummim. Furthermore, the turban (*mišnæpæt*)⁴ with the golden ornament, the holy crown (*šiš ha-zāhāb nēzær ha-godæš*), mark Aaron as the *primus inter pares*, i.e., the reader must assume that there always will be one individual priest out of all male descendants of Aaron who will wear these special robes and attire.⁵ To pursue this idea further, Lev 8:12 adds the anointing of Aaron’s head. Only Aaron gets this anointing. His sons take part in the anointing, as their vestments are sprinkled with the anointing oil and the blood of the ram of ordination (Lev 8:30), but they do not get an anointing of their heads. Thus, the narrative of the ordination of the first priests in Lev 8 already implements the leading role of one single priest (Gorman 1990, 120; Fleming 1998, 408–414; Watts 2013, 466). One can understand the command in Exod 40:15, “anoint *them*”, in a chronological sense, i.e., only one priest at the same time officiates as *the* anointed priest, while the plural refers to eternal dynasty of leading priests throughout the centuries (“a perpetual priesthood throughout all generations to come”).

Lev 4:3 deals with the sin of the “anointed priest” (*ha-kohēn ha-māšīaḥ*) and thus corroborates the understanding that the Book of Leviticus pursues the concept of one single leading priest as *primus inter pares*. The uniqueness of the robes combined with the uniqueness of his tasks create a great and serious problem if the holder of this office fails and sins. Thus, the passage about the sin offering (or rather: purification offering) devotes a separate section for the case

4 With the exception of Ezek 21:31, the Hebrew Bible uses this term exclusively for the headgear of the high priest (see Exod 28–29; 39).

5 For further details about the high priest’s vestments and their reception in Early Jewish literature, see Watts 2013, 450–452. See also the article by Nihan & Rhyder in this volume.

that the anointed priest unintentionally trespasses any of Yahweh's commandments (Lev 4:3–12).

Another passage clearly singles out *the* one and only priest as successor of Aaron and attributes to him a leading role: “The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments” (Lev 21:10). Here, the term “high priest” already appears (*ha-kohēn ha-gādōl*; Oswald 2015, 315), creating a certain anachronism within the narrative fiction of the encampment of the people at Mount Sinai. It is clear that the text exactly designates the office of the high priest. The following prescriptions in Lev 21:10–15 regarding hairdressing, vestments, refraining from mourning rites and touching corpses, and marriage (only a virgin of his own kin) refer to the high priest only.

Thus, the cultic and ritual prescriptions in the Book of Leviticus regarding the attire, anointment, and behavior of one single priest as successor of his father Aaron mark this individual as *the* unique representative of the priesthood that will fulfil the difficult tasks of the crucial ritual at the Day of Atonement. Although the Book of Leviticus seems to be concerned only with cultic and ritual issues, it nevertheless becomes clear that it subtly provides the basis for a high public regard of the office and thus also for a leading position of the office holder. Already in Num 35:25–28, the death of “the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil” has important consequences within the process of asylum. The slayer who killed a fellow accidentally and without intention shall live within the original city of refuge and be secure from the avenger of blood; after the death of the high priest, the slayer may return home. Again, the high priest is the anointed one. The amnesty of the slayer in the city of refuge reminds of the acts of restitutions in the course of the accession to the throne of kings in the ancient Near East (Oswald 2015, 315). Some more biblical texts function as proof texts for the tendency of the high priest as the anointed one to take over more and more tasks of political leadership until he became the leader of the Jewish community (*ethnarch*) in the Hellenistic era. Such texts are Gen 14:18–20 (“Melchizedek” as a legitimization for the claims of the Zadokide line of the high priests), Psalm 110 (“Melchizedek” as a legitimization for the combination of “king” and “priest”), and Isa 61 (the proclamation and inauguration of the anointed high priest) (Achenbach 2007; Oswald 2015, 316–320).⁶ Especially Isa 61 combines the inauguration of the

6 For Isa 61, Reinhard Achenbach (2007) comprehensively discusses various suggestions for the identity of the “anointed one” who proclaims his mission from God. The wording fits neither for the inauguration of a prophet nor for a metaphorical speech of “Lady Zion”, as there are no real parallels for anointing a prophet and absolutely no occurrence of an anointing of a woman.

anointed high priest with a wide-ranging amnesty and restoration of rights of freedom, as the kings of the ancient Near East practiced it customarily (the *derōr*, see Achenbach 2007, 224). Thus, the anointed one, in post-exilic times only the high priest, issues a decree to abate debts and punishments. In doing so, the high priest clearly posits acts of political, social, and religious leadership (Achenbach 2007, 244).

In his praise of the fathers, or better, “Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors”, Ben Sira elaborates on the idea that God “exalted Aaron” (Sir 45:6) and then collects the description of Aaron’s vestments and ordination from the texts in Exodus and Leviticus. However, God not only designed Aaron “to make atonement for the people”, but he also gave him “authority and statutes and judgments” (Sir 45:16–17) – thus, Ben Sira indicates that the unique cultic role inseparably implies a leading role in public matters. The following section about Phinehas (Sir 45:23–25) stresses the idea of the dynasty, i.e., the following generation inherits the leading role from the father. The high priest’s leadership is handed down from father to son. Finally, Ben Sira sees the climax of the office with Simon son of Onias, who is “the leader of his brothers and the pride of his people” (Sir 50:1). Simon not only officiated in his special role on the Day of Atonement, “as he came out of the house of the curtain” (Sir 50:5), but he also fortified the temple and the city “to save his people from ruin” (Sir 50:4). The cultic pre-eminence of the “anointed priest” of the Book of Leviticus meanwhile clearly developed into an overall political leadership of the high priest.

4.2 One Priest, Once a Year, a Unique Rite in a Unique Room

Once again, it is necessary to stress the observation that the ritual design of the Day of Atonement in Lev 16 paves the way for the priestly leadership in general and the monarchic leading position of the anointed priest in particular. However,

Hence, Achenbach opts with good reasons and a wealth of parallels from the ancient Near East and ancient Egypt for the understanding of the passage as part of an inauguration ritual for the high priest. The self-proclamation was necessary because the people themselves had no access to the procedure within the sanctuary. Thus, after the completion of the inaugural rites in the sanctuary and within the group of the other priests, the high priest leaves the sanctuary and proclaims the amnesty and the decree to abate debts and punishments based on his anointment and charismatic election by Yahweh (Achenbach 2007, 240–241). This scenery appears as a suitable *Sitz im Leben* of Isa 61, while the final form of the text within the composition of Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah functions as an oracle of legitimation for the high priest in the late Persian period (Achenbach 2007, 244).

the texts do not develop this concept explicitly by way of a tractate about leadership, but rather by narrowing down the crucial point to a single event once a year. The well-being of the whole people and every single member of it depends on the unique ritual of the Day of Atonement once a year. Lev 16:29–34 has a very wide and a very narrow scope at the same time: By extending the abstention from work and the fasting to the entire people, *all* take part in the process of atonement by way of a spiritual participation all over the world. However, the crucial and unique rite happens only once, executed by one especially singled out priest (the anointed priest within the dynasty of one single family) with unique linen vestments exclusively worn at this single place and this unique time of the year. This one and only priest performs one unique rite in a unique room used exclusively for this purpose: No human being ever enters the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary except for the high priest once a year for the two blood rites on behalf of the priests and the people. The course of history demonstrates that this process of focusing on one single priest, the unique room, and the unique rite almost naturally led to a leading position of this priest (and his family) also in political matters. Vice versa, every group and family who claimed political power and the leadership of the people logically claimed the office of the high priest. The performance of the ritual of the Day of Atonement became the key to political power. This unlucky religious-political constellation crashed with the destruction of the Second (Herodian) Temple in 70 CE by the Romans, and with the cessation of the rituals at the temple the issue of leadership needed to be reorganized substantially (see below).

4.3 External Evidence for the Development in the Fourth Century BCE

There is some consensus in biblical scholarship to date the completion of the Book of Leviticus (and the Pentateuch) within the fifth century BCE.⁷ The concept

7 On the development of the priesthood and the Levites in the Second Temple period, see, e.g., Blenkinsopp 1995, 87–98. Regarding the broader question of government in Yehud, see, e.g., Cataldo 2009, 170–193. Based on extra-biblical evidence like the Elephantine papyri, the books of Haggai and Zechariah, and the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah, Cataldo points out that Yehud was not a theocracy during the Persian period (p. 191). The priests as the leading religious authority were not able to hold authority over and administer the entire social, economic, and political spheres or realms of the society. Economically, the Persian imperial tax system was operational in Yehud (if Neh 5:4–15 reflects some reality from the Persian period). Regarding the political realm, the imperially appointed administrative officials administered the province. Thus, no po-

of the “anointed priest” and his unique task thus laid the foundation for the development of the high priest’s leadership. Although there is almost no biblical narrative about the events of the fourth century, one must assume that during this time the formation of Judaism took place as it emerges in the later sources, including the organization of leadership. By the end of the fifth century, in 407, the community at Elephantine sent a petition to Jerusalem concerning the rebuilding of the temple of Yaho. Within this letter, the sender, Jedaniah, mentions that the community already had sent an earlier address to “our lord” (the governor Bigvai of Judaea) and to “Jehohanan the High Priest and his colleagues the priests who are in Jerusalem and to Ostanes the brother of Anani, and the nobles of the Jews” (TADAE A4.7, 1986, 71; Cowley 30, 1923, 114). To this date, the high priest was a very important person that one had to consult and even mention before the other priests and the aristocracy (Oswald 2015, 310). By the end of the fourth century, Hecataeus of Abdera writes a report about the Jews of his time. Diodorus Siculus refers to this report, which depicts the high priest as the one who stands out against the other priests by his virtue and intellect. He proclaims the divine law during assemblies, and the Jews follow him obediently and with adoration. The tendency is clear: The high priest became the most powerful figure in early Hellenistic Judaea (Oswald 2015, 311). In *Contra Apionem* 1:187, Josephus mentions “Hezekiah, the High Priest of the Jews” who not only was a man of great dignity among his people, but also very skilful in the management of affairs (περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων). Finally, coins minted in the fourth century carry the inscriptions *ywhnn hkhn* (“Johanan the priest”; Barag 1985, 166–168) or *yhzqyh hphh* (“Hezekiah the governor”): The high priest had the right to mint coins like the governor or the king. Practically one could speak of a kind of diarchy of the governor and the high priest (see Schaper 2000, 159; 1995, 533–534). The right to mint coins with an inscription of declarative character (like “Johanan *is the Priest*”) clearly marks an important claim for leadership and documents the ability to practice

litical vacuum existed allowing the priests to claim power in these areas. From a socio-historical point of view, Cataldo’s conclusions are plausible and acceptable. However, as this study wants to point out, this does not mean that the priesthood’s claim for leadership was irrelevant for everyday life. Even if the priests did not govern the province and administer grain, wine, oil taxation and trade, their religious demands had at least some impact on life and society of the people in Yehud. Even if the priests’ concept of economy and their suggestions for avoiding impoverishment unfolded in the prescriptions for the Jubilee year (see Lev 25) were a kind of utopia never carried out in reality, the priests raised their voice in parenetical manner against the exploitation of the poor. Thus, the priests proclaimed God’s guidance (*tōrāh*) for a prosperous life in society and religion. In doing so, they claimed a form of spiritual leadership, even if they definitely were not able to implement all of their concepts in political reality.

some kind of leadership in reality.⁸ Moreover, the external evidence of coins mentioning the high priest directs the considerations about leadership in the Book of Leviticus to an important field that one may not overlook: the economy.

5 “It’s the economy, stupid!” (James Carville, 1992)

In 1992, James Carville coined the phrase “the economy, stupid” during the successful presidential campaign of Bill Clinton versus George H. W. Bush. Originally, the slogan was one of three messages the campaign workers should focus on.⁹ The slightly varied quote in the header shall remind biblical scholars not to forget the social and economic basis of biblical narratives and prescriptions. The Book of Leviticus is a rich resource to elucidate how the priests secured their economic basis and their permanent income by their ritual descriptions without ever talking explicitly about their salary.

5.1 Priestly Income Given By God (Lev 2)

The subtleness of the priests’ approach toward issues regarding their income manifests for example in the context of the burnt offering. According to Lev 1, the burnt offering appears as a very noble sacrifice, since the human beings (the Israelites) present the whole animal to the deity by burning it on the altar. At first glance, it seems that no one has any economic profit from this destruction of a valuable animal. However, hidden in special prescriptions regarding the guilt offering, Lev 7:8 states *en passant* that the priest who offers anyone’s burnt offering shall keep the skin of the animal. On the one hand, practical reasons recommend refraining from trying to burn the skin of a bull or a goat on the altar. On the other hand, the hide is a precious material, usable for a variety of purposes – and the priests are free to use it and profit from the leather.

⁸ Watts 2013, 465, points out that the Hebrew Bible does not depict priests wielding royal power. Usually priests presented themselves as humble servants of the deity. “Even after Aaronide high priests emerged as Judaea’s political rulers in the Second Temple period, they did not claim the royal title until the first century B.C.E., when the Hasmonean high priest Alexander Jannaeus added ‘king’ to his coins”.

⁹ The other two were “change vs. more of the same” and “Don’t forget health care”. See the Wikipedia entry “It’s the economy, stupid” (last visited April 30, 2018).

However, the Book of Leviticus addresses the priestly income even more directly and transparently. Lev 2 deals with the grain offerings (*minḥā*). The ritual proceeds as follows: the priest takes a handful from the choice flour (wheat) or the prepared (baked) cakes and burns it together with frankincense on the altar. The large rest of the flour mixed with oil or the baked cake goes to the priests as their diet. However, this is what really happened, but not how the text presents the procedure and how the reader should understand the theological concept. According to the text, the handful of flour or cake that the priest takes is a “token portion” (Hebrew: *'azkārā*) that represents the entire offering. Thus, in theory, the offering person gives the entire grain offering to Yahweh, and Yahweh gives back most of it to the priests as their food. The theological effect cannot be underestimated: The offering person does not “pay” the priests, nor do the priests “channel off” anything from the offerings for Yahweh. From the offering person’s viewpoint, her entire gift goes to Yahweh, and that is all that matters for the Israelite. Regarding the priests’ perspective, they get their share, in fact the largest part of the offering, not as a payment from the Israelites, but rather as a “most holy” food from Yahweh. Hence, the flour, the cakes or wafers underlie certain limitations. The priests must consume the grain offering within the holy precincts, and only the male among the descendants of Aaron may eat it (Lev 6:11, English: 6:18). Thus, they may not sell it to a third party or gain any other sort of profit from it. Economically, however, the priests have a constant and secure supply with flour, bread, cakes and the like as long as the Israelites want to offer a *minḥā*. Their share is indisputable and beyond negotiations: By putting the deity in an intermediary role, the priests and the offering persons do not negotiate directly. The offering person has no loss, and the priests live by the generosity of Yahweh and thus are only obliged to Yahweh – they are not dependent on the offering persons. The concept itself turns out to be a divine statute, since it underlies the same literary frame as Lev 1: Yahweh tells Moses from the tent of meeting to instruct the people and the priests how to proceed with the rituals (Lev 1:1–2).

5.2 Defined Shares by Divine Legislation

The same holds true for the other defined shares of the priests. Especially Lev 6–7 specify the portions of the offerings that go to the priests as their income, and these chapters like all other texts in the Book of Leviticus are presented on the literary level as divinely ordained statutes, transmitted to the whole people and the priests by Moses and Aaron. Thus, the regulations regarding the income of the priests are not a human institution or tariff that needs to be negotiated from time

to time, but the portions for the priests are “their perpetual due throughout your generations” (Lev 6:11, English: 6:18).

The effects of these ordinances presented as of divine origin are hardly to underestimate on the economic level. The priests secured their income of choice flour and meat, even salt (see Lev 2:13), on a high level, indisputable and beyond negotiation, closely tied to the religious needs and obligations of the Israelites. As long as the priests can perform the sacrificial rituals and as long as the Israelites (Jews) want to celebrate their worship in this way, the economic basis for the priesthood is stable. On this basis, claims for leadership are rather natural and easily to be achieved. Consequently, with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE by the Romans, this economic basis breaks off and almost immediately, the small elite of priests vanishes from history, together with their leadership claims.

5.3 Pragmatic Ways to Secure the Economy of the Temple (Lev 27)

The priests elaborate their basic idea to combine service for religious needs with economic gain in Lev 27. The ending of Lev 26 and the corresponding one in Lev 27 clearly mark the latter chapter as an appendix. Nevertheless, it solves an important problem that comes up by the growing of the community that is oriented toward the temple. At some point, it was no longer possible to offer all animals and gifts promised to the temple on the burnt offering altar. Hence, the priests defined a way to convert the vows of the people into money (silver). On the one hand, they take the need seriously that people want to express their thankfulness toward God by a gift offered to the temple; on the other hand, they generated a reliable procedure to channel these needs into a stable economic foundation of the temple and its activities. Again, this is an example how the priests understand “leadership”: They pave the way for the Israelites to fulfil their vows and to come into contact with the living God at the sanctuary through the cult; thus, they provide a kind of religious service and administer pastoral care. However, they also succeed to generate economic gain from this service, but no one will complain about that or argue that the priests exploit the people. At least the paperwork functions correctly and leaves a fair impression.

6 Further Thoughts

One can deepen the conceptual claim of priestly leadership in the Book of Leviticus by some further thoughts. Did the concept run smoothly, or are there traces of abuse and conflicts? How do holiness – a basic prerequisite for the priesthood – and leadership go together? Finally, how did the destruction of the temple in 70 CE affect the issue of leadership?

6.1 Leadership: Privileges *and* Responsibilities (Mal 2)

Several passages in prophetic literature indicate that at times the priests failed to do justice to the responsibilities linked to their spiritual and economic privileges (see above). From the critique in Mal 2 against the priests and their current behavior, one can reconstruct the expectations and obligations the priests had to meet (Hieke 2006, 37–40). The phrase “if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name” (Mal 2:2) signals the expectation by the public that priests do fulfil their tasks wholeheartedly and honest, or, in other words, that they take seriously and really believe what their ancestors or colleagues write in the normative texts later called “Torah”. Hence, the concept of leadership sketched above only works properly if the priests stick to their own prescriptions and keep up the standards set by themselves. Carelessness and fraud, iniquity and corruption occurred, but the public, at least the prophets, did not ignore that. With divine authority (“says the LORD of hosts”), the prophetic writing called “Malachi” announces the punishment Yahweh will bring over the disobedient priests. Later on, one finds a catalog of responsibilities of the priests (Mal 2:5–7): reverence of Yahweh and his commandments (i.e., the prescriptions the priests themselves wrote down), true instruction, integrity, uprightness, warning the people of iniquities (hence, striving for justice), guarding knowledge, and providing the people instructions (Hebrew: *tōrā*) for their proper behavior before Yahweh. In short: the priest is the “messenger (Hebrew: *mal’ak*) of the LORD of hosts”. The priest is like an angel (Hebrew: *mal’ak*). The passage from Malachi demonstrates that the priestly tasks mentioned in Lev 10 (see above) were not only lip service but that the people in fact demanded the priests to act accordingly. Hence, priestly leadership (including privileges) always walked hand in hand with a high degree of responsibility (and the real experience of failure).

6.2 Holiness and Leadership

In order to motivate the priests to stick to their own program and to keep the ways of Yahweh (Mal 2:9), the Book of Leviticus uses the concept of holiness. Leviticus introduces the chapter about the correct ethical behavior with the programmatic line “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19:2; hence the name “Holiness Code” for Lev 17–26). The human holiness of the Israelites thus represents God’s holiness on earth, i.e., the Israelites’ behavior makes God’s justice, mercy, and holiness visible – or not (see, e.g., Hieke 2015). The same holds true even more for the priests. Hence, Lev 21–22 provide prescriptions how the priests can maintain their holiness and avoid corruption. Repeatedly, the text inculcates the priests to take care of themselves (their own body) in order not to defile themselves with corpses etc., and furthermore, to be careful with the holy offerings of the Israelites. The relative comprehensiveness of the presentation might indicate that there probably was a problem. Priests did not maintain their ritual impurity and officiated nevertheless, and they accepted cheap animals with blemishes as fully sized offerings for Yahweh – again, one can learn that from Mal 1:6–14 and thus find out that the priests trespassed against Lev 22:17–25. However, in doing so, the priests undermine their own standards and squander their claim for leadership and thus their privileges. Hence, the idea of holiness of the priests in the Book of Leviticus is the attempt to keep up not only ritual purity, but also the ethos of their class and the entitlement of their claim for leadership.

6.3 Leadership after 70 CE

Priestly claims for leadership in political and public matters stand nevertheless in close connection to their officiating at the sanctuary. Especially the concept of holiness that inseparably combines ritual purity and a corresponding ethical behavior confirms that, as the previous paragraph demonstrated. The indispensability of the priests for the sacrificial cult at the temple, and particularly the unique ritual of the unique priest, the anointed priest or high priest, on the Day of Atonement are the basis for the priestly claim for leadership. Thus, the destruction of the Herodian temple in 70 CE not only leads to the end of the sacrificial cult; it definitely ends the claim for priestly leadership from one day to the other. However, the case was even more complicated (Oswald & Tilly 2016, 147–148): On the one hand, the priestly aristocracy was trying to keep peace with the Romans and to secure their own privileges; on the other, a growing movement of zealots strived for a radical change of the religious, social, and economic conditions. During the “Jewish War”, which was also a civil war, the revolutionary zealots set

the palaces of Herod and the high priest as well as the archive of the temple with its bonds and tax lists on fire. Under the lead of Manahem they killed the high priest Ananias (*Bellum Judaicum* 2:442–443), and this event deepened the factions among the Jewish fighters. When John of Giscala seized power in Jerusalem, he and his followers erected a brief regime of terror and killed most members of the priestly aristocracy (*Bellum Judaicum* 5:14–18). The end of the bloody civil war came with the victory of the Romans over the Jewish rebels in Jerusalem and the complete destruction of the temple and the city.

The end of the temple effected an entirely reorganization of Jewish leadership (Watts 2013, 507). The new basis was the Torah and the study of Scripture. This was the domain of the Pharisaic movement, and coming from these roots, the rabbinic Judaism took over the task of leadership and managed it to establish some autonomous Jewish administration in Jabne. This newly established network of Jewish scholars, the “Rabbis”, was a non-priestly movement (Blenkinsopp 1995, 114). However, some surviving priests from the Jerusalem temple tried to keep up their special commandments and to preserve the cultic prescriptions to consolidate their priestly community and to claim a special social function and authority regarding jurisdiction. Later on, they worked as rabbinic scholars. Jewish tradition kept some prescriptions and prerogatives for the members of families that can trace back their ancestry to a priest, a *kohēn*, until today.

7 Conclusion

Without addressing the issue directly, the Book of Leviticus establishes an unquestionable status of priestly leadership connected to claims for governance at least in certain areas of life. Within the descriptions of the rituals (Lev 1–10), the priests intervene as essential intermediaries between the offering person (a man or a woman) and the addressed deity. The altar as the place where the offering (an animal or wheat flour) ascends to the divine realm by burning is a restricted area, and the blood of the offered animal a restricted substance: Only the priests may approach the place and handle the blood. Hence, the priests as intermediaries in the cult are indispensable for Israel’s religious life.

Regarding the questions about permitted food and about clean vs. unclean (Lev 11–15), the priests function as teachers (see Lev 10:11) and deciders (Lev 13), thus preventing the Israelites from transgressing the lethal border between the unclean and the holy and keeping up order and peace within the community.

It turns out that Lev 10, probably the last chapter added to the block of Lev 1–26, became the hidden agenda of priestly leadership. It starts with a nar-

rative that dramatically warns the audience not to invent any religious rituals (“such as the LORD had not commanded them”) and thus advises the priests, too, not to abuse their position as intermediaries and teachers. Lev 10:8–11 summarize the priests’ major tasks beyond the handling of the offerings: deciding and teaching. These tasks, however, lead to a key position of the priests within society.¹⁰ As always, such a key position in leadership comes with a high amount of responsibility and thus with a high potential to fail and to abuse the powerful status, as examples from prophetic literature sufficiently demonstrate.

Within the priesthood itself, the Book of Leviticus (in connection with passages from Exodus) singles out one specific priest who functions as the immediate successor of Aaron. This particular priest gets the anointment described for Aaron and the special vestments. Furthermore, he has to perform the unique ritual of the Day of Atonement in the unique room of the Holy of Holies once a year in order to achieve the reconciliation promised by Yahweh for himself, the entire priesthood, the sanctuary and the whole people of Israel. Thus, the anointed priest is the unique intermediary who finally guarantees the renewal of Israel’s relationship with God. This uniqueness based in the prescriptions of Lev 16 and related passages (Lev 4:3; 21:10) almost naturally leads to a special role of this specially anointed priest concerning the leadership of the people.

Biblical passages like Num 35:25–28; Gen 14; Ps 110; Sir 45:6–26 as well as extra-biblical evidence (Aramaic documents from Elephantine; coins) confirm this reconstruction of the historical development of the anointed priest toward the high priest of the post-exilic era. Beginning in the late Persian period and during the 4th century BCE, the high priest increasingly takes over political responsibilities of leadership and becomes the leader of the Jewish community (*ethnarch*) in the Hellenistic period.

¹⁰ Consequently, Josephus praises the Jewish constitution according to the Torah that acknowledges God as governor of the universe and the priests as administrators of the principal affairs, while the high priest retains the government over the other priests. The lawgiver did not appoint the priests due to their riches or abundance of possessions, but he assigned the principal management of divine worship to those who exceeded others in an ability to persuade men, and in prudence of conduct. The priests took care of the law; they were ordained to be inspectors and judges. Finally, Josephus adds with enthusiasm: “What form of government can be more holy than this?” (Τίς ἂν οὐκ ἀρχὴ γένοιτο ταύτης ὁσιωτέρα; *Contra Apionem* 2:185–188; see also *Antiquitates Judaicae* 11:111; 14:41,91; Cataldo 2009, 122–125). As already pointed out in fn. 7, these claims and key positions do not necessarily mean that the priests ruled the province and acted out the claims for leadership stated in the Book of Leviticus in reality. On the other hand, one should not underestimate the priests’ influence on society and politics *via* their domination of the cult and religious life of the people.

Economically, the priests secured their financial basis by an elaborated system of shares they get from the offerings of the people. In the case of the grain offering (*minhā*), the priestly share stems from Yahweh (in theory), as the priest burns a handful of the grain offering as a token representing the entire offering to Yahweh, and Yahweh gives the larger part back to the priests. Even in those cases where the text prescribes to hand over a part of the sacrifice directly to the priests, the prescriptions are the word of Yahweh mediated by Moses to Aaron and the Israelites. Thus, these prescriptions are of an indisputable character (“a perpetual due from the people of Israel throughout their generations”, see, e.g., Lev 7:36).

The privileges and leading positions of the priesthood, however, come with several obligations and responsibilities. The entire people knows about the tasks and shares of the priests, since these prescriptions are part of the Torah and thus public knowledge. Hence, the priests underlie the same demands to observe the word of God; they need to stick to their own code and meet their own requirements. Otherwise, the prophets will criticize the priests’ behavior. At least, this is the theoretical concept as one can deduce it from the biblical texts. It is hardly possible to find out what happened in reality when priests abused their position and acted treacherously and corruptly. No legal institution on the human side existed against which a priest had to vindicate himself, and there was no legal process to dismiss a priest from office. It was God’s task to call the priests to order. However, the concept of holiness in the second half of the Book of Leviticus represents some sort of a code of ethical conduct for the entire people and even more for the priests. The upright behavior of the people and the priests represent God’s holiness and thus the divine presence on earth. However, this is but a mere motivation, even if a strong one, to observe the commandments and to act according to the prescriptions. It is not a legal enforcement and no system of detailed sanctions that some sort of public prosecutor would execute.

In sum, priestly leadership according to the Book of Leviticus emerges subtly from the narrative of history led by God and by the specific way in which this narrative presents the legislation. According to the two-tiered introductory formula (see, e.g., Lev 1:1–2), the prescriptions stem from divine authority and hence are unquestionable. Thus, the leading role of the priests as indispensable intermediaries, deciders, and teachers together with the related privileges appears to be an eternal concept. However, the close connection of priestly leadership to the cult at the sanctuary led to an almost immediate break-off after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 CE. As the Torah replaced the temple, the leadership moved to those who transmitted and interpreted the written sanctuary. Members of priestly families no longer executed their original tasks; they kept their leading role only if they joined the movement of rabbinic scholarship.

What remains fascinating about the observations on Leviticus' subtle establishment of the claims of priestly leadership is the way of its implementation and execution. This sort of leadership evolves without direct decrees and active claims and it comes with a high standard of responsibilities and ethical conduct. Priestly leadership acts for the sake of the people and fulfills their religious needs. The priests lead the people in a responsible way and in a manner that leaves the Israelites oblivious to the priests' guidance. Regarding the ethical conduct, this kind of "Servant Leadership"¹¹ has some exemplary and ideal aspects. From today's perspective, however, it has a paternalistic notion and lacks necessary implements of controlling.

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¹¹ See, e.g., Greenleaf 1977; Böhlemann & Herbst 2011, 68–71.

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