

IMAGES OF POWER AND A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

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As far back as human records allow, hierarchy formed the structure of the ancient Near East.¹ From an early priest-king to the “great man” (king), royal rule united both the secular and the sacred.² Sometimes viewed as the shepherd of his people,³ the king united himself ceremonially to a goddess in a “sacred marriage” by which he gained validation and elevation in office as well as religious supremacy.⁴ During the second millennium, patrimonialism dominated the hierarchic landscape, whereby “the house of the father” stratified society. The “fathers” included the eldest son, his father, all ancestral “fathers” (though deceased), the father of the clan, the father of the tribe (if such existed), and the king. The king also possibly served a suzerain “father” as his vassal, and all kings, whether vassal or overlord, served the gods, the ultimate fathers. This meant that every man had at least one “father” over him and most men had someone under them. Viewed as producers of male heirs, women held considerably less power. However, if married to a “father” higher up in the hierarchy, a woman possessed some freedom and limited ability to manage affairs.⁵ During the first millennium B.C., the great kings of the Neo-Assyrian period ushered in a new era of increased military might and

¹This study contains a portion of a larger paper, entitled, “Images of Power, the Image of God, and a Kingdom of Priests,” which I presented at the annual meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, November 16, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois.

²See J. N. Postgate, “Royal Ideology and State Administration in Sumer and Akkad,” *Civilization of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson; 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 396, 397; Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 215-223. Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Man’s Recorded History* (3d ed.; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1981), 31.

³*CAD* 14:310; the Laws of Hammurabi Prologue; Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda: CDL, 1993), 1:62.

⁴Pirjo Lapinkivi, “The Sumerian Sacred Marriage and Its Aftermath in Later Sources,” in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 7-16; see also Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence* (SAAS 15; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project of the University of Helsinki, 2004), 9-16.

⁵I obtained this portrayal from J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (HSMP; SAHL 2; Harvard Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001).

far-reaching territorial power, to be followed by the Chaldean kings of the Neo-Babylonian period. While patriarchy still bore sway, government became increasingly bureaucratic and powerful.⁶

Power and the Marginalization of Women

Since men both wrote the vast bulk of ancient texts and were also the predominant readers and teachers of those texts, these materials reflect the views of a male-dominated society. Certainly in folk religion, women contributed to the myths about goddesses in their oral origins and may have felt drawn to worship goddesses. At the canonical level of society, however, particularly in Mesopotamia, the perception of goddesses served to undergird society's prescribed roles of women rather than to enlarge them. Instead of serving merely as women's chosen archetypes, they represent the roles that society held sacred for women, roles that men would understand and appreciate as they read and taught these stories.⁷

As power increased in society during the first millennium, so women's inequality with men intensified in nearly all areas. Women no longer appeared as administrators and could not enter most professions. Whether temple priestess or merely a wife, a woman remained under the governorship of men during the Neo-Babylonian period.⁸ Thus what appears axiomatic—that power correlates with inequality and disempowerment of others—bears true in studying the trajectory of authority in ancient Mesopotamia.

Power and the Hebrew Bible

By the time of the patriarchal period (equivalent to the Old Babylonian period) hierarchical organization had structured society for over a millennium. Inevitably, the people who comprised what became the Israelite community brought with them a heritage based on power. For this reason, much, if not most, of the Hebrew Bible speaks in terms that seem to legitimize domination and control.⁹ Utilizing a unique form of canonical criticism, I have chosen to call this predominant view the “major voice” of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ The

⁶Benjamin R. Foster, “Western Asia in the First Millennium,” in *Women's Earliest Records: From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia*, ed. Barbara S. Lesko; Brown Judaic Studies 166 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 213-214.

⁷Tikva Frymer Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 14.

⁸Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “Women in Neo-Babylonian Society,” *Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 26 (1993): 9-13.

⁹See, e.g., the book of Numbers for repeated references to “the house of the father;” Josh 1:16-18; Judg 18:1; 21:25; 1 Sam 8:1-6; 2 Sam 7:1-3; 1 Kgs 12:1-16; 2 Chron 1:2; Ezra 10:1-44; Job 1:5; Ps 2; 23; 40:9; 72:1-17; Prov 2:1; 3:1; 14:28; 23:1-21.

¹⁰See James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). My use of canonical criticism lies closer to that of Bevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 99-138.

major voice more closely resembles the human voices of the ancient Near East, yet it is an inspired voice mediated through Israelite voices and acceding to their will and ways, yet modifying them and selecting from among them what the present situation requires.

If the Bible only reflected the major voice, power would have the final word. Yet a closer reading of biblical texts reveals another voice, sometimes direct and confrontational, but often subtle and unrecognized. Usually represented in moments of “beginnings,” this minor voice represents God’s preferred will and for that reason it often challenges the major voice of dominance and power. Rather than attempt to select between the plethora of seemingly contradictory messages, viewing some as “wrong” or “not inspired,”¹¹ I hold both voices to be equally canonical but recognize that they play separate roles.¹² The major voice reveals how God mediates and adapts his will to the reality of human choices, whereas the minor voice represents God’s original or preferred will for the people.

Quite clearly, the minor voice of the Hebrew Bible opposes hierarchy and domination at all levels. Several examples will have to suffice. The prophet Samuel speaks directly against Israel’s insistence on kingly authority,¹³ while prophets Amos and Micah denounce the powerful and their injustices against the poor. Isaiah speaks of leveling mountains (a term for hierarchy) and lifting up valleys to make everything equal.¹⁴ God casts down two kings, portrayed as fallen heavenly beings, because of their arrogance and tyranny in oppressing even their own people.¹⁵ Finally, Zechariah declares to the governor Zerubbabel that the Lord would make the mountain of opposing forces a plain “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit.”¹⁶ Overall, the prophets frequently rebuke the kingly powers. This contrasts significantly with the Assyrian prophets who extolled their kings, promising them protection and greatness,¹⁷ though at times they might criticize them for cultic failures.¹⁸

¹¹As James E. Brenneman (*Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy* [New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 137) seems to do.

¹²My utilization of the basic hermeneutic of *prophetic* (equals minor voice) and *constitutive* (equals major voice) differs here from Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 70, and Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict*, 101.

¹³1 Samuel 8:1-18.

¹⁴Isa 40:4; cf. Mark S. Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker; SBLWAW 9 (Scholars Press, 1997), 91-95, 98, 106, 110.

¹⁵Isa 14:4-27 and Ezek 28:1-19.

¹⁶Zech 4:6, 7, NRSV.

¹⁷Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (State Archives of Assyria 9; Helsinki: Helsinki University, 1997), 4-11, 38, 39.

¹⁸Martti Nissinen, “The Social Religious Role of the Neo-Assyrian Prophets,” in *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives*, ed. Martti Nissinen; SBL Symposium Series 13 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 105; SAA 9 3.5 iii 13-37 in Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* 26, and cited by Nissinen.

Even in Mari, where prophets warned kings, they aimed only to guide the king, not to confront him.¹⁹

A Kingdom of Priests

The Pentateuch and wisdom literature contain more examples, but chiefly this study focuses on the Sinai covenant in Exod 19-24 and particularly 19:3-6. Through a close reading of the text, one may find an equalization of Israel, so that the entire nation, whether a “father” or subordinate, whether male or female, finds itself included in the covenant.

Moses went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, “Say this to the house of Jacob, and announce this to the sons of Israel: ‘You have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on the wings of eagles and brought you to me. Now, if you will really listen to my voice, and if you will keep my covenant, then you will be for me my personal possession out of all of the peoples; for all the earth is mine. As for you, you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you shall declare to the sons of Israel.”²⁰

This message neatly encapsulates Yahweh’s objectives in making a covenant with Israel, since it contains a prologue similar to what precedes the Decalogue, followed by a statement of Israel’s purpose, then the stipulations, and finally the response of the elders.²¹ Yet, initially, it appears that the people will hear only the major voice of hierarchy and male dominance. The terms “house of Jacob” and “sons of Israel” that frame this passage, recall “the house of the father” with its patriarchal governance. No doubt, the Israelite community understands these words in such terms. Moses immediately summons the elders of that community and sets this covenant before them. They in turn report it to the males under them (usually their sons and younger brothers), but not necessarily to their women. Later, when instructing the people to prepare themselves to meet God, Moses orders the men, “Do not go near a woman.”²² When Yahweh speaks the Ten Commandments to Israel, he will speak to them individually in the second masculine person singular. In Exod 19:3, only Moses may ascend to the top of the mountain; in the tiered ascent of 24:1-2, only Moses may come near the Lord, while Aaron, his sons, and the 70 elders of Israel must remain at some distance on the mountain. The people stay on level ground at its foot.

¹⁹Herbert B. Huffmon, “A Company of Prophets: Mari, Assyria, Israel,” in *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives*, ed. Martti Nissinen; SBL Symposium Series 13 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 56.

²⁰Exod 19:3-6, my translation.

²¹Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: a critical theological commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 366.

²²Exod 19:15, NRSV; cf. Drorah O’Donnell Setel, “Exodus,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; London: SPCK (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 33.

So far I have highlighted the major voice of Scripture, but a closer reading may result in a very different interpretation. The terms “house of Jacob” and “sons of Israel” in Exod 19:3, while they do indeed designate “the house of the father,” do not exclude women. The “house” of an ancestor included all his descendants, male and female; likewise the term “sons of Israel” (*bene yisrael* [בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל]) denotes the descendants of Israel.²³ In the opening lines of chapter 19, “the sons of Israel” come out of Egypt and camp in front of Mount Sinai.²⁴ Clearly, “the sons of Israel” consist of the entire camp of Israelites, men, women, and children. These same “sons of Israel” God addresses in his covenant promise.

In the context of this information, the terms “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” gain new meaning. According to W. Propp, these terms can be read two different ways—“one elitist and the other egalitarian.” In the elitist sense, the “priestly kingship” would mean that priests rule the Israelite nation, thus becoming “a holy nation ruled by (even holier) priests.” Though some immediate, scant evidence supports this view, considerably more substantiation underlies the “egalitarian” view.²⁵ In this stance, *all* Israelites will serve as priests to the surrounding nations.²⁶ Evidence for this includes the fact that the people obey the divine command to wash their clothes and Moses sanctifies them—both priestly functions. From then on, various passages refer to the Israelites as individually holy;²⁷ holiness as a requirement, therefore, embraces all, not just the priests.²⁸ Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites individually must observe priestly kinds of regulations in areas such as marriage, diet, hygiene, and mourning that belong to the priestly arena.²⁹

The fact that God later orders the priests not to “break through to come up to the Lord”³⁰ suggests that the giving of the covenant leveled the playing field for Israel, leaving priests and people on the same footing. But who are these priests? Canonically, the Aaronite priesthood remains future. Do these

²³See TDOT 1:151; cf. Schloen, *The House of the Father*, 108, 112, 113, 149, 150, 249.

²⁴Exod 19:1-2.

²⁵William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 157-159.

²⁶Exod 19:5; cf. Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005), 147; Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (NAC 2; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 423.

²⁷Exod. 22:30. Num. 16:3; Deut. 7:6; 26:19; 28:9.

²⁸Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 157-158; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1714.

²⁹Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 157-159.

³⁰Exod 19:24, NRSV. Cf. Propp (*Exodus 19-40*, 166); J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (BST; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 195-210).

priests refer to the firstborn, obviously males,³¹ whom God earlier commands to be consecrated to him?³² Their role remains unstated; parents dedicated them to Yahweh against the backdrop of the final plague of Egypt, in which the firstborn was slain.³³ Later, God tells Moses not to make gold or silver images or build altars to him of materials other than dirt or unhewn stones and directs these injunctions “to the sons of Israel,” not to the priests.³⁴ Finally, Moses selects young men (not elders) to offer the sacrifices instead of “the priests,” thus placing nearness to God’s presence—not priesthood—as the highest level of holiness.³⁵ Given all this evidence, the “kingdom of priests” connotes a kingdom without a king, with every individual Israelite a priest.³⁶

But does “every individual” include the women? Immediately after Moses told the elders the words of Exodus 19:3-6, “*all* the people answered together and said, ‘We will do all that Yahweh has declared,’” apparently speaking through their elders.³⁷ From this point until Exod 20:22, the narrator and the voice of God do not refer to the “sons of Israel” but only to “the people” (*ba’am* [אֲמָרָה] or *am* [אֲמָרָה]).³⁸ The shift prepares the reader for the event of God speaking to all the people from Sinai.

Later, however, when giving the priestly orders for washing the clothes, Moses says “*to the people* (*am* [אֲמָרָה]), ‘Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.’”³⁹ Here it appears that “the people” consist only of men.⁴⁰ One could appeal to the notion that in ancient patriarchy men controlled the sexual activity of women; thus in the Hebrew Bible, sexuality rarely finds mutual expression but operates male to female.⁴¹ Yet, a close reading of this passage shows that Moses added these words as a natural extension of the preparation God required. The divine command includes “have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day,”⁴² but states nothing about avoiding women sexually. Here, I loosely follow Robert Alter’s use of rhetorical analysis in noting that, in speeches repeated by another, changes or

³¹See Exod 13:13, 15.

³²See Exod 13:2, 11-16.

³³See Exod 13:14-16.

³⁴Exod 20:22-26.

³⁵Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 294.

³⁶Motyer (*The Message of Exodus*, 199); cf. Durham (*Exodus*, 263)

³⁷Exod.19:8, my translation, with italics supplied.

³⁸For a study of this term, see *TDOT* 11: 174-176.

³⁹Exod 19:15, NRSV.

⁴⁰Setel, “Exodus,” 33; Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University, 2005), 154.

⁴¹Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, ed., *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 414-415.

⁴²Exod 19:10-11, NRSV.

additions may indicate significance and meaning.⁴³ Since Moses clearly adds the injunction—“do not go near a woman”—it seems therefore he serves as mediator between God and the people, naturally representing the major voice that dominates his cultural heritage.⁴⁴ God’s intended message embraces every Israelite in the preparation for his descent on Sinai.⁴⁵ In other words, the original message conveys inclusivity; but as Moses mediates it to the people, his wording reflects “the house of the father.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, just as everyone—men, women, and children—wash their clothes and abstain from sex, so everyone participates in priestly cleansing.

The real test of inclusion is the question, Whom does the covenant that God speaks from Sinai take in? Since the terms “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” are part of the Sinai covenant,⁴⁷ they correlate with the Decalogue. These terms therefore concern all those who hear the voice of God speak the Ten Commandments. Exod 19:17, NRSV, states that “Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.” The Hebrew is explicit—“the people (*ha’am* [אָמ])—not “the men,” nor “the house of Jacob,” nor the “sons of Israel.” Does “the people” include the women?

In a good example of the inclusiveness of the term “people (*‘am* [אָם]),” Moses speaks for Yahweh to Pharaoh: “Let my people go.” In response, Pharaoh asks who will go with him to worship Yahweh. Moses replies, “We will go with our young and our old . . . [and] with our sons and daughters.”⁴⁸ Deductively, the “we” includes the wives; to leave behind the wives would deprive the “young” of the care they would need. Though, the term *‘am* [אָם] finds its semantic roots in patrimonial, kinship, and cultic relationships,⁴⁹ R. Good did a thorough study of it and concluded that it stems originally from the sound a sheep makes and thus refers anciently to a flock or herd of humans.⁵⁰ A flock of sheep without ewes seems anomalous, but even if Moses led only the men to the foot of Sinai, who heard the great voice of God pealing through the desert? Did not everyone hear the Ten Commandments,

⁴³Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 100-104. Though he applies this to changes in repeated speeches that convey foreshadowing of a future event, I believe in principle that the technique can be used to express other meanings.

⁴⁴See Meyers, *Exodus*, 154.

⁴⁵Cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, Hebrew University, 1967), 230.

⁴⁶I agree with Cassuto (*A Commentary*, 230), who sees this not as Moses’s addition to what God has said but rather clarification about God’s intentions. Cf. Childs (*The Book of Exodus*, 369) who agrees.

⁴⁷Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 366.

⁴⁸Exod 10:3, 9, NRSV.

⁴⁹HALOT 838.

⁵⁰Robert McClive Good, *The Sheep of His Pasture: A Study of the Hebrew Noun ‘Am(m) and Its Semitic Cognates* (HSM 29; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

regardless of where they stood?⁵¹ Earlier, God had announced to Moses, “On the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai *in the sight of all the people*.”⁵² Who all could see the glory, hear the trumpet and thunder, and feel the earthquake? Surely every man, woman, and child.⁵³ Thus God spoke the covenant to all these people and included them thereby in the “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation.”

Yet, in the giving of the Ten Commandments, God addresses the second *masculine* singular. Do these commandments apply to each Israelite individually,⁵⁴ or only to each male Israelite? D. Stuart notes that virtually all the laws of the Hebrew Bible address the men.⁵⁵ To apply this to the Decalogue, then, when God says, “I am Yahweh your (masculine singular) God who brought you (masculine singular) from the land of Egypt out of the house of slavery,”⁵⁶ it means that God brought only men out of Egypt, something denied by the song of Miriam.⁵⁷ To be sure, the tenth commandment forbids “you” (masculine singular) to covet “your” neighbor’s wife. Yet any Israelite (male or female) would find a command for “you” (feminine singular) not to covet “your” neighbor’s husband incomprehensible, since in antiquity adultery occurred between a man and another man.⁵⁸

In reality, when choosing to speak in the second person singular, one had only two options in Hebrew—masculine or feminine.⁵⁹ Therefore, the second masculine singular pronoun serves to indicate “each” person in the Israelite community.⁶⁰ The fourth commandment heightens the inclusivity of the ten by employing the infinitive absolute as an intensive “imperative”:⁶¹ “Remember (זָכוֹר [זָכוֹר]) the Sabbath day.” This seems especially appropriate since the Sabbath commandment enjoins rest equally on all—“you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave.”⁶² The apparent exclusion of “wife” in the text only lends support for her inclusion in the second masculine singular

⁵¹See Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 413.

⁵²Exod 19:11, NRSV, italics added.

⁵³See Stuart, *Exodus*, 445.

⁵⁴Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 167.

⁵⁵Stuart, *Exodus*, 427 n. #293.

⁵⁶Exod 20:2, my translation.

⁵⁷Exod 15:20-21.

⁵⁸See Meyers, *Exodus*, 175-176.

⁵⁹A. van Selms, “Some Reflections on the Formation of the Feminine in Semitic Languages,” in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. Hans Goedicke (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 421.

⁶⁰Eskenazi, *The Torah*, 416.

⁶¹The infinitive absolute contains no gender. See E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (2d English ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 316-317; 324-326; 346.

⁶²Exod 20:10, NRSV.

verb “you shall not do” (*lo'-ta'aSeh* [לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה]). Otherwise, wives would have to work on Sabbath—something completely out of harmony with the general thrust of the commandment. The fact that the next commandment orders children to honor both father and mother underscores this assumption for the second masculine singular. In light of this evidence, the covenant includes *all* Israel—men on all levels in “the house of the father,” and women equally. Thus its corollary, “a kingdom of priests,” equally applies to every individual in the Israelite community.

Final questions concern the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Did Moses not act as leader in the hierarchical sense? In answer, I suggest that Moses' role as intercessor with God for the people resembles the function of early women of ancient Sumer whom society cast in this role.⁶³ Though the Bible consistently portrays him as Israel's deliverer from Egypt, God specifically states that he himself will bring Israel out before he assigns that task to Moses.⁶⁴ Indeed, Moses does not even direct Israel when to leave camp or when to stay; rather God's symbol of his presence indicates movement.⁶⁵ Moses' style of leadership chiefly manifests itself in telling Israel what God has said and in acting on God's behalf.⁶⁶ Though the former appears prophetic and the latter seems kingly,⁶⁷ God clearly has the upper hand throughout the stories of Moses' leadership, and truly reigns as Israel's King.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the apparent hierarchy in the approach of Moses, Aaron, his sons, and the seventy elders to God in Exod 24 stems, not from power over people, but from holiness in terms of nearness to God.⁶⁹ The sanctity of the mountain demands distance, not merely because people will profane it by their ascent, but because, if they enter the cloud to look at Yahweh, they will perish—the reason why later Moses himself cannot see God's face.⁷⁰ Three times, in Exod 19, God tells Moses to warn the people not to come up on the mountain, thus emphasizing the potentially deadly presence of Yahweh to people in their unholy state.⁷¹

God's holiness, then, requires a holy character to receive its presence.⁷² In the dispute between Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, God selects Moses as one

⁶³See Jean-Jacques Glassner, “Women, Hospitality and the Honor of the Family,” in *Women's Earliest Records From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia*, ed. Barbara S. Lesko Brown Judaic Studies 166 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 78.

⁶⁴Exod 3:7-10; 19:4.

⁶⁵Exod 13:21; 40:34-38; Num 9:17.

⁶⁶Exod 3:7-12.

⁶⁷Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 4; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 338-43.

⁶⁸See, e.g., Exod 5:22-6:8; 13:17-14:4, 19-26, 30-31; 17:1; 25:1-8.

⁶⁹Cf. Meyers, *Exodus*, 154.

⁷⁰Exod 19:21; 33:20-23.

⁷¹Cf. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 599.

⁷²See Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1711.

with whom he speaks “face-to-face—clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord,” while prophets receive the divine revelation through dreams and visions.⁷³ Thus Miriam, the prophet,⁷⁴ stood at a greater distance from God than her youngest brother Moses. Significantly, Aaron, the priest, receives no mention in this context. Given that in Exod 33:19 and 34:6-7, God equates his glory with his moral, spiritual nature rather than with his power, it would seem that this “hierarchy” signifies elevation that stems from a person’s ability to enter the divine presence, rather than a bestowal of authority over others. Moses communicates with God person-to-person while Miriam, more distantly, accepts visions and dreams. Aaron, as high priest, deals with sacrifices and other cultic rituals where the revelation and presence of God remain the most remote (aside from Aaron’s ability to see the Shekinah once a year on the Day of Atonement).⁷⁵ The “hierarchy,” then, relates to one’s ability to receive divine revelation, not to one’s power over others (perhaps the reason the narrator styles Moses as the meekest person on earth).⁷⁶

A hierarchy of holiness, then, does not result in domination over people but in individual obedience to God. Perhaps this is why Schloen believes that in Israel a flattening of hierarchy occurs to the point where an individual could envision a personal relationship with God directly rather than worship through a network of intermediary, hierarchical fathers.⁷⁷

Similarly, the Mount Sinai experience flattens the people into non-hierarchical status with one another. When God comes to speak to Israel, every person, including the priests, stands on level ground below the mountain. Though God finally tells Moses to bring up Aaron with him,⁷⁸ the text does not indicate that Moses made it back up with Aaron in time for God to speak.⁷⁹ Ignoring the chapter break, Exodus 19:25 and 20:1 (NRSV) read as follows: “So Moses went down to the people and told them. Then God spoke all these words.” It appears, then, that God spoke the Ten Commandments to all Israel standing on one level place. No priest, prophet, leader, elder, man, woman, or child stood on higher ground. They all together formed “the kingdom of priests.”

Given this, why did the Aaronite priesthood come into existence? In my canonical approach to the Hebrew Bible, I believe the minor voice usually indicates first God’s preferred plan, followed by a response of the people involved, either of trust and obedience or of distrust and disobedience. In the latter case, the major voice responds by adapting to the will of the people. Both expressions represent God’s will, but the minor voice reflects his preferred

⁷³Num 12:6-8, NRSV.

⁷⁴Exod 15:20.

⁷⁵Lev 16:2; contra Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1012-1013.

⁷⁶Num 12:3.

⁷⁷Schloen, *The House of the Father*, 91.

⁷⁸Exod 19:24.

⁷⁹Stuart, *Exodus*, 433.

will while the major voice reflects his willingness to let people have their own way and to work within their choices.⁸⁰ In the case of Israel at Sinai, this shift to the major voice takes place when the people request not to hear God speak to them. Frightened by the real, powerful display of God, they request a mediator, Moses.⁸¹ The priestly role entails communication with divinity as a mediator on behalf of others. Originally, God intends each Israelite to serve in this capacity as members of the priesthood on behalf of the rest of the world;⁸² he therefore speaks directly with them all. Because they cannot handle the voice of God or His presence manifested on Sinai, they reveal their lack of holiness and preparation for meeting God, thus failing the test he has given them.⁸³ Instead of meeting his ideal, they essentially retreat to “the house of the father,” where patriarchy and mediation play viable roles. From then on, God communicates through the hierarchy of Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the seventy elders to complete the covenant and communicates to them that he wishes his people no harm.⁸⁴

Not long after, the Israelites move still farther away from their sacred priestly role when they make a graven image of a male calf, creating their own gods to lead them. The events that follow include the visible breaking of the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, the slaying of 3,000 people by the tribe of Levi and, as a result, the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood.⁸⁵ Reading the text in its canonical order enables the reader to see that the more Israel fails its priestly role, the more hierarchy, dominance, and inequality prevail. The minor voice retreats at the will of the people; the major voice dominates whenever required by the people for them to continue in relationship with God. Both voices remain the voice of God; both reveal His “will” but only the minor voice retains his preferred plan.

Conclusion

By examining the contours of power in the ancient Near East, this study shows that to the extent that hierarchy bears sway, inequality and marginalization of others result. Yet the ancient mind could only conceive of social order if someone or a network of individuals possessed the power to control the lives of others. Though this hierarchical structure did not completely deprive people of their ability to function as human beings, the word “autonomous”

⁸⁰My use of “major” and “minor” voices here serves as variations on the “prophetic” and “constitutive” in Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 70. Jesus himself uses this approach when dealing with the divorce laws (Matt 19:8).

⁸¹Exod 20:18-21.

⁸²Exod 19:5; cf. Meyers, *Exodus*, 147; Stuart, *Exodus*, 423.

⁸³Exod 20:20; Childs (*The Book of Exodus*, 373) understands this test to determine whether Israel would respond to God with “fear,” that is, obedience.

⁸⁴Exod 24:1-11. This is the meaning of the statement in v. 11 that God did not lay a hand “on the chief men of the people of Israel” (Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 296).

⁸⁵See Exod 33:19-29.

does not describe them. Freedom to them meant power—power to control others, gain wealth, and acquire descendants and thus perpetuity.

In this world of dominance, Yahweh, a deity relatively unknown outside of Israel, attempts to form a people who will break the power that profanes what he has destined to be holy. When forced into slavery in Egypt, Yahweh responds creatively to bring them out of bondage. At the foot of Sinai, the people stand on one level plain while God peals out the terms of his covenant with them. Called to be a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation,” Israel falls far short of this ideal, opting instead for “the house of the father” as its guiding principle.

Nevertheless, throughout both Old and New Testaments, the reader can hear the minor voice of God’s preferred will, often missed due to traditional and more powerful ways of reading texts. In his minor voice, he calls his people to forsake the path of dominance and power for service to others, justice toward the poor and weak, and holiness born of humility. The call of Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” reflects one of the means by which the minor voice speaks. This call to men, women, and children, when heeded, creates unity (that is, oneness), whereas hierarchy creates control, subservience, and inequality. This call prefigures a prophetic time when God’s Spirit will be poured out on all flesh so that both sons and daughters will prophesy. This call foreshadows the New Testament teaching of the priesthood of all believers.