

Violence and the Israelite Priesthood: Between Sacrifice and Bloodshed*

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■ Abstract

Contrary to the enduring image of Israelite priests as enveloped in an aura of serene sanctity, there is a darker side of the priesthood—one which associates its members and their ancestors with disturbing acts of interpersonal violence. The motif of priestly violence is a significant, albeit overlooked literary trope in the Hebrew Bible and post-biblical Jewish literature. This article identifies this motif and episodes in its reception, demonstrating how it relates to human sacrifice and the slaughter of animals in the sacrificial cult, and illuminating these connections with contemporary theories of religious and workplace violence. Finally, this study makes clear that certain negative portrayals of the priesthood are part-and-parcel of the Jewish interpretive tradition and should not be reflexively dismissed as reflective of anti-clericalism or anti-ritualism.

■ Keywords

priesthood, violence, motif, reception, biblical, Jewish, sacrifice

* Portions of this article took shape and gained feedback at the Philip Markowicz Lecture in Judaism and Jewish Biblical Studies at the University of Toledo, as well as at the Northwestern University Jewish Studies Colloquium. I am grateful to Ellen Muehlberger for helping me advance my arguments at critical points; to Mark Brett for giving extensive critique on an earlier draft of this essay; and to George Benson for his valuable input and encouragement. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and helpful feedback.

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HTR 118:1 (2025) 1–18



■ Introduction

Like the morning star among the clouds, like the full moon at the festal season; like the sun shining on the Temple of the Most High, like the rainbow gleaming in splendid clouds. (Sir 50:6–7, NRSV)

With these vivid words, Ben Sira begins his elaborate description of the High Priest Simon II emerging from the inner sancta of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in the late third century BCE.¹ The image of a resplendent High Priest clothed in crisp robes and bedecked with jeweled vestments would shape an enduring perception of the wider priesthood as a body cloaked in splendor, sterility, and silence. Given the centrality of priests as cultic functionaries, political leaders, and producers of literature, the above images from Ben Sira were easily formed within priestly circles and perpetuated among the Jewish people at large.²

But this idyll, which privileges legal and ritual texts, is incomplete. In the narrative tradition concerning priests and the priesthood, on the other hand, we find stories featuring members of the Israelite priesthood or their eponymous ancestors engaging in acts of seemingly senseless interpersonal violence.³ Thus Levi is

¹ See Otto Mulder, *Simon the High Priest in Sirach 50: An Exegetical Study of the Significance of Simon the High Priest as Climax to the Praise of the Fathers in Ben Sira's Concept of the History of Israel* (JSJSup 78; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

² On popular perceptions of the priesthood, with special attention to the post-destruction era, see Matthew Grey, "Jewish Priests and the Social History of Post-70 Palestine" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2011).

³ While the traditional portrayal of the priesthood limits the office solely to those Levites who can trace hereditary descent back to the biblical Aaron, one dominant scholarly view maintains that the pre-exilic period saw a pan-Levite priesthood that included a Mushite clan (descendants of Moses). On the Levite-Mushite connection, and with extensive references to previous literature, see Mark Leuchter, *The Levites and the Boundaries of Israelite Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Contrary to the confidence given in these latter approaches to the biblical text preserving genuine traditions about the Levites from the pre-exilic period, a thoroughgoing skepticism guides Harald Samuel's assessment of the very same corpus of texts; see his *Von Priestern zum Patriarchen. Levi und die Leviten im Alten Testament* (BZAW 448; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). Samuel's view is representative of recent continental scholarship about the development of the priestly *Grundschrift*—an early core of priestly traditions which was later subjected to supplementation and revision. According to this school of thought there is practically no recoverable pre-exilic data about the Levites. Consequently, there is also a complete negation of the aforementioned paradigm for the development of the priesthood. This school's presuppositions lean heavily on what Peter Altmann has called "a reliance on *text-internal* markers for dating" (emphasis in original). An openness to careful archaeological and anthropological studies conducted in conjunction with the biblical text, like those of Lawrence Stager and Jeremy Hutton, provides a multifaceted plausibility structure for the institution of pre-exilic Levites. See Peter Altmann, "What Do the 'Levites in Your Gates' Have to Do with the 'Levitical Priests'?" An Attempt at European-North American Dialogue on the Levites in the Deuteronomic Law Corpus," in *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition* (ed. Mark Leuchter and Jeremy Michael Hutton; AIL 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 135–54, at 141; Lawrence E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel" *BASOR* 260 (1985) 1–35; Jeremy Hutton, "All The King's Men: The Families of the Priests in

portrayed (together with his brother Simeon) as responsible for the massacring of all of the males of Shechem (Gen 34:25–26). In his very first act upon stepping out into the world as an adult, Moses, himself a Levite, surreptitiously kills an Egyptian and is forced to flee for his life (Exod 2:11–15). Later, in the aftermath of the Golden Calf apostasy (Exod 32:26–29), Moses musters the Levites and exhorts them to rampage through the Israelite camp and kill thousands, even family members. Finally, Phinehas the priest—the grandson of Aaron, and great-nephew of Moses—slays an Israelite man and the Midianite woman with whom he dared consort in public (Num 25:7–8).

None of these acts of violence is explicitly condemned; in fact, in two of the above narratives the perpetrators are *rewarded* as a consequence of their violence. The Levites who answered Moses’s call and killed some 3,000 Israelites were rewarded with a cryptic blessing, expressing apparent investiture into the priesthood (Exod 32:29).⁴ Similarly, Phinehas is rewarded with a twofold covenant: a covenant of peace and, more importantly, a “covenant of eternal priesthood” for him and for his descendants (Num 25:11–13).⁵

When read together, these texts—though deriving from disparate sources and historical contexts—highlight a steady literary undercurrent, which I refer to as the “motif of priestly violence.” Biblical narratives which deploy this motif generally show at least four of the following features: 1) The actor is a member of the Israelite priesthood (broadly construed); or an eponymous ancestor; or a layperson acting in a priestly capacity; 2) an act of interpersonal violence is perpetrated; 3) the text is suffused with sacrificial language, regardless of whether a sacrifice has taken place; 4) the violent act occurs at, or adjacent to, a cultic site; 5) the violent act is a fratricide; 6) the violent act is not condemned and in some cases it is even praised; 7) the violent act is accompanied by a ritual failure or misfire; 8) the attacker is silent during the act of violence. These associations between the priesthood and violence are not confined to the narrative sphere or to any one literary source, priestly or otherwise,⁶ nor is the motif limited to the

Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Seitenblicke. Literarische und historische Studien zu Nebenfiguren im Zweiten Samuelbuch* (ed. Walter Dietrich; Friborg/Gottingen: Academic Press/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010) 121–51.

⁴ This is perhaps also alluded to in Moses’s blessing of Levi in Deut 33:8–11. See Joel Baden, “The Violent Origins of the Levites: Text and Tradition,” in *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition* (ed. Leuchter and Hutton), 103–16. I remain unconvinced by Reinhard Achenbach, however, who argues that these verses are a late gloss and refer not to a pre-exilic Levite caste but rather to the Aaronide high priesthood. See Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora. Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (BZABR 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003) 565–66.

⁵ On the tension between these verses and the “prior” promise of “eternal priesthood” (albeit without covenant) in Exod 40:15, see Christophe Nihan, “The Priestly Covenant, Its Reinterpretations, and the Composition of ‘P,’” in *The Strata of the Priestly Writings: Contemporary Debate and Future Directions* (ed. Sarah Shectman and Joel Baden; ATANT 95; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2009) 87–134; here at 124–25, 127.

⁶ A remarkable number of theories attend, for example, to the putative sources of the stories

Pentateuch. In one of the more graphic instances of this motif in the prophetic literature, Elijah, acting in a priestly capacity in the famed contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:21–29), quite literally “slaughters” (טָהַר) the prophets of Ba‘al.⁷ Hosea is portrayed as speaking out against gangs of murderous priests whom he compares to robbers lying in ambush (Hos 6:9). In addition, we find Pashhur ben Immer, the priest and “chief overseer” of the Temple, beating the prophet Jeremiah and putting him in the stocks (Jer 20:1–2). Finally, recognition of, and engagement with, the motif can be found even outside of the Hebrew Bible, and it continues in post-biblical literature well into the medieval period.⁸

While a number of scholars have previously grouped this constellation of texts together, especially with regard to the violence of the Levites, there has yet to be a sustained attempt to understand how or why the wider motif of priestly violence might have coalesced and how examining these questions might shape its interpretive potential. By the same token, treatments of the zeal of Phinehas are quick to link the violence of Numbers 25 with other well-known, infamous episodes of biblical (and extra-biblical) violence, but they are generally devoid of discussion of how this episode partakes in a wider motif of interpersonal violence

of priestly violence in both Genesis 34 and Exodus 32. For a survey of positions, see Robin Parry, “Source Criticism & Genesis 34,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 (2000) 121–38; Christine Hayes, “Golden Calf Stories: The Relationship of Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 9–10,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; JSJSup 83; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 45–94. While there is an overall consensus that the story of Phinehas in Numbers 25—the exemplar of the narrative motif—belongs to the priestly source, recent continental scholarship has viewed this narrative as foreign to the priestly *Grundchrift*; see n. 16

⁷ On the distinctly priestly valences of Elijah’s actions at Mount Carmel, see Marvin A. Sweeney, “Prophets and Priests in the Deuteronomistic History: Elijah and Elisha,” in *Israelite Prophecy and the Deuteronomistic History: Portrait, Reality, and the Formation of a History* (ed. Mignon R. Jacobs and Raymond F. Person, Jr.; AIL 14; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014) 35–49. The unspoken motif of Elijah’s priesthood is likewise detected and deployed in post-biblical literature, both Jewish and Christian, on which see Louis Ginzberg, *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern* (Amsterdam: Gebr. Levisson, firma D. Proops Jz, 1899) 76–80. I plan to address this motif further in a future study.

⁸ For a comprehensive overview of the motif and its interpretive history, see Yonatan S. Miller, “Sacred Slaughter: The Discourse of Priestly Violence as Refracted Through the Zeal of Phinehas in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Literature” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015). On the rabbinic materials, albeit with less concern for biblical reception, see Azaria Baitner, *Priests Are Irritable: The Image of the Priests in Rabbinic Literature* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2016) [Hebrew].

involving the Israelite cultic personnel.⁹ This is the case both in standard reference works on the priesthood as well as in more focused studies.¹⁰

Mark Leuchter's study of the "Mushite legacy of violent conflict" represents the furthest any scholar has gone towards an attempt to identify the genesis of any aspect of the motif, albeit with a focus solely on this one levitical sub-group. For Leuchter, Mushite violence can be grounded in two types of historical events dating back to the Late Bronze Age: 1) extramural skirmishes protecting the Canaanite highlands from attacks on the frontier; and 2) intramural jockeying for cultic sites and, by extension, for priestly legitimacy.¹¹ Writing about the Levites writ-large, Joel Baden concedes that while the Levites are "undeniably" associated with violence, nevertheless "[t]he evidence does not allow us to make any conclusive statements as to the origin of the connection."¹² Richard Elliot Friedman similarly demurs on the interpretive question, writing that his takeaway from these suggestive texts is: "You do not mess with the Levites. Otherwise you find a horse head in your bed."¹³

Even setting aside the quest for origins, the very notion of a motif of priestly violence poses a challenge to certain schools of contemporary scholarship on the Israelite priesthood and Priestly writings. First, there are those scholars for whom the Priestly source is pacifistic and for whom associations of violence with the priesthood (broadly defined) are said to derive either from non-priestly sources or otherwise from later accretions to the priestly *Grundschrift* (P⁶).¹⁴ These additions are implied to be deficient in their Priestly *bona fides*, even if they were

⁹ In a widely noted study, John Collins, for example, situates Phinehas alongside the Deuteronomic language surrounding the annihilation of the Canaanites and the prophetic motif of "eschatological vengeance." See John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *JBL* 122 (2003) 3–21. Similar moves are evident in a recent monograph wholly devoted to Phinehas; see Anthony Rees, *[Re]Reading Again: A Mosaic Reading of Numbers 25* (LHBOTS 589; London: Bloomsbury, 2015). Only a brief excursus on levitical zeal is made in Johannes Thon, *Pinhas ben Eleasar, der levitische Priester am Ende der Tora* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006) 55–58. See also Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* (trans. David Smith; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989) 146–228, esp. 177–79.

¹⁰ I have attempted to rectify this situation in other publications; see Yonatan S. Miller, "Phinehas' Priestly Zeal and the Violence of Contested Identities," *JSQ* 26 (2019) 117–45.

¹¹ Mark Leuchter, "The Fightin' Mushites," *VT* 62 (2012) 479–500. See also Thomas Römer, "Les Guerres de Moïse," in *La construction de la figure de Moïse—The Construction of the Figure of Moses* (ed. Thomas Römer; TranseuSup 13; Paris: Gabalda, 2007) 209–14.

¹² Baden, "Violent Origins of the Levites," 116.

¹³ Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Exodus* (New York: HarperOne, 2017) 91. Cf. Leuchter, *Levites*, 11–12.

¹⁴ See esp. Thomas Pola, *Die ursprüngliche Priesterschrift. Beobachtungen zur Literarkritik und Traditionsgeschichte von P⁸* (WMANT 70; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995). See also Thomas Römer, "Israel's Sojourn in the Wilderness and the Construction of the Book of Numbers," in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld* (ed. W. Brian Aucker, Timothy H. Lim, and Robert Rezetko; VTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 419–45, at 425; Konrad Schmid, *A Historical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019) 154.

penned in priestly circles.¹⁵ As Thomas Pola writes, for example, the militarized portrayal of the Israelite encampment in Num 1 cannot be that of the “pacifistic Priestly composition,” which he refers to as the “*pure cult community*” (*der reinen Kultgemeinde*).¹⁶

Quite to the contrary, claims of priestly pacifism fail, at the very least, on account of the violence of animal slaughter.¹⁷ This makes a comprehensive reappraisal of traditions concerning the violence of the priesthood a *desideratum*, especially given the extent to which the claim of pacifism serves *ipso facto* as a criterion to define the scope and shape of Priestly compositions.¹⁸

Second, the motif and its reception demonstrate that seemingly negative portrayals of the priesthood and their involvement with animal sacrifice need not be reflexively dismissed as motivated by anti-clericalism or anti-ritualism.¹⁹ That there is a recurring, anti-priestly *Tendenz* (tendency towards ideological bias) in critical literature on the Hebrew Bible, and that this hermeneutic is both implicitly and explicitly rooted in anti-Judaism (and anti-Catholicism), needs to be recognized

¹⁵ Attempts to disentangle violence from the Old Testament go back to Christian writers in antiquity and have a distinctly teleological bent which, on occasion, slips into overt anti-Judaism. See the sources collected in Roland Bainton, “The Early Church and War,” *HTR* 39 (1946) 189–212; John Helgeland, “Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine,” *ANRW* II, 23:1 (ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979) 724–834. A recent attempt to interject the Levites into this discussion rests on thin textual evidence; see Daniel H. Weiss, “Christians as Levites: Rethinking Early Christian Attitudes toward War and Bloodshed via Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine,” *HTR* 112 (2019) 491–516, esp. 509 n. 42.

¹⁶ Pola, *Priesterschrift*, 67 (emphasis in translation is mine): “Die Perspektive von Num 1 (ff) ist die der *ecclesia militans*, nicht mehr der der reinen Kultgemeinde. Der hier anzutreffende Horizont ist nicht der der ‘pazifistischen’ Priesterschrift, sondern der des Groß-Jehowisten bzw. des DtrG.”

¹⁷ There are, nonetheless, those scholars who would exclude the instructions for the regular sacrificial cult from P’s *Grundschrift*; see, e.g., Pola, *Priesterschrift*, 343–49; Eckart Otto, “Forschungen zur Priesterschrift,” *Theologische Rundschau* 62 (1997) 1–50, esp. 25–27. My view follows that of Liane Feldman: “To separate the narrative and the ritual components of the Priestly Narrative is to destroy the internal structure and logic of the story.” See Liane M. Feldman, *The Story of Sacrifice: Ritual and Narrative in the Priestly Source* (FAT 141; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020) 5.

For pacifist views on animal slaughter, see James Kellenberger, “Nonviolence Toward Nonhuman Animals,” in *Religion, Pacifism, and Nonviolence* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) esp. 139–44; Christopher Key Chapple, “Animals, Vegetarianism, and Nonviolence,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence* (ed. Andrew Fiala; New York: Routledge, 2018) 343–54.

¹⁸ Much, admittedly, rests on the scope of the term “pacifism,” but this only serves to underscore the difficulties of making redescriptive claims about scriptural ideologies. See, e.g., David Clough, “Understanding Pacifism: A Typology,” in *Political Practices and International Order: Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Societas Ethica, Oxford 2006* (ed. Stefan Heuser; Münster: LIT Verlag, 2007) 370–381.

¹⁹ All too often it is clear, however, that these biases lurk just beneath the surface; see Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Klawans notably makes no mention of priestly violence, which is perhaps a function of his focus on prescriptive, and not narrative, texts. See also Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

and reckoned with.²⁰ But appealing to this *Tendenz* does not somehow undo the traditions examined here, which call for a fresh appraisal of attitudes towards the priesthood and the sacrificial cult in the biblical and Jewish traditions.

In the following, I probe interpretive possibilities for the formation of the motif of priestly violence and trace a number of episodes in its reception history in post-biblical Jewish literature. I argue that the biblical text links this motif with the violence of both human and animal sacrifice and, moreover, that these linkages were detected and made regnant in Jewish post-biblical writings from antiquity and beyond. I will also illustrate how contemporary theories of religious and workplace violence shed further light on these sacrificial valences of priestly violence. Finally, this study underscores that the early Jewish reception of the biblical text may shed valuable light on the history of perceptions of the Israelite priesthood.

■ Priestly Violence and Human Sacrifice

One aspect of the motif of priestly violence may find expression in the practice of human sacrifice. While the Israelite priestly cult is virtually synonymous with *animal* sacrifice, the Hebrew Bible preserves deep resonances of a *human* sacrificial tradition. To be sure, the biblical record is decidedly mixed, with texts both criticizing and even appearing to affirm the practice, and scholars continue to debate whether these texts are indeed reflective of a genuine practice in ancient Israel.²¹

What cannot be disputed, however, is the pervasive preoccupation with this phenomenon throughout the Hebrew Bible. Infamous narratives such as the binding of Isaac (Gen 22) and Jephthah's offering of his daughter for sacrifice (Judg 11:29–40) presuppose that human sacrifice is both legitimate and effective.²² These narratives are complemented by a litany of graphic polemics against human

²⁰ The literature on this subject is vast. For two recent overviews, see Stacy Davis, "Unapologetic Apologetics: Julius Wellhausen, Anti-Judaism, and Hebrew Bible Scholarship," *Religions* 12.8 (2021) 1–14; and Paul Michael Kurtz, *Kaiser, Christ, and Canaan: The Religion of Israel in Protestant Germany 1871–1918* (FAT 122; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

²¹ For a brief survey of the field in current research, see Jason Tatlock, "The Place of Human Sacrifice in the Israelite Cult," in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (ed. Christian Eberhart; RBS 68; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 33–48; Glenn M. Schwartz, "Archaeology and Sacrifice," in *Sacred Killing: The Archaeology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Anne Porter and Glenn M. Schwartz; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012) 1–32. For a novel anthropological view of human sacrifice, see T. M. Lemos, *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Contexts* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²² See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Dolores Kamrada, "The Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter and the Notion of Herem," in *With Wisdom as a Robe: Qumran and Other Jewish Studies in Honour of Ida Fröhlich* (ed. Károly Dániel Dobos and Miklós Köszeghy; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009) 57–85. It was the understanding of numerous early interpretive works, such as the book of Jubilees, that Abraham was, indeed, a priest. See Martha Himmelfarb, "A Kingdom of Priests: The Democratization of the Priesthood in the Literature of Second Temple Judaism," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997) 89–104.

and/or child sacrifice lodged by the Israelite prophets as well as numerous legal injunctions against human sacrificial practices.²³

With the practice of human sacrifice lurking in the background, whether actual or imagined, an association between the priesthood and interpersonal violence is thrown into sharp relief. Indeed, if the biblical record already maintains a consistent memory of the cultic slaughter of humans, the notion that priests—who are inextricably intertwined with the sacrificial cult—would be associated (or stereotyped) with interpersonal violence does not seem farfetched.²⁴ This move is seen in the early interpretation of an ostensible *positive* commandment for human sacrifice. According to Exod 22:28, God places unequivocal demands on *all* “first fruits,” even first-born males:

מִלֵּאֲתֶךָ וּדְמִעַךְ לֹא תֵאָחֵר בְּכֹר בְּנִיךָ תִּתֵּן לִי.

You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.

The most violent sense of this verse would be papered over through inner- and post-biblical exegesis, which read this latter commandment as substitutionary rather than sacrificial.²⁵ But one of these inner-biblical substitutionary moves is to mark the Levites, writ-large, as a replacement for firstborn sacrifice.²⁶ In other words, the rhetoric of human-sacrificial violence—albeit a reprieve therefrom, in this instance—is deeply enmeshed within the very identity of the Levites.²⁷

This human-sacrificial valence of priestly violence is quite overt in the case of the anonymous Levite in Judges 19.²⁸ His outrage over the gang-rape of his

²³ See Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:55; Isa 57:5; Ezek 16:21; and Lev 18:21; 20:2–5; Deut 18:10–12. See also Deut 12:31. On the freighted term מִלֵּךְ, see Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities* (BZAW 338; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

²⁴ Hanson contends that some of these practices would have been performed on the (ruins of the) Temple Mount, which invites the insinuation of priestly participation; see Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 199–200. See also Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 113–14.

²⁵ For the process of redemption, see Exod 13:13; 34:20; Lev 27:6; Num 18:15–16. For a review of scholarship on this verse, see John van Seters, “The Law on Child Sacrifice in Exod 22:28b–29,” *ETL* 74 (1998) 364–72. Cf. Levenson (*Death and Resurrection*, 9) who contends that Exod 22:28 is a “theological ideal” and is not to be construed as evidence of sacrificial practice, implied or otherwise.

²⁶ Num 3:11–13; 40–51; 8:14–18.

²⁷ This move is articulated well in Stuart Lasine, “Levite Violence, Fratricide, and Sacrifice in the Bible and Later Revolutionary Rhetoric,” in *Curing Violence* (ed. Mark I. Wallace and Theophus Harold Smith; Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1994) 204–29. For ritual slaughter by Levites, see 2 Chr 35:6, 11; Ezra 6:20; Ezek 44:9–16 (cf. Num 18); see Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 137–43; Jaeyoung Jeon, “The Levites and Idolatry: A Scribal Debate in Ezekiel 44 and Chronicles,” in *Chronicles and the Priestly Literature of the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Jaeyoung Jeon and Louis C. Jonker; BZAW 528; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021) 348–74.

²⁸ See Stuart Lasine, “Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World,”

concubine in the town of Gibeah (which he actively facilitated!) leads to a graphic sequence, the cold and systematic nature of which is highlighted with the use of four *waw*-consecutive verbs in the space of ten words:²⁹

ויבא אל ביתו ויקח את המאכלת ויחזק בפילגשו וינתחה לעצמיה לשנים עשר נתחים וישלחה
בכל גבול ישראל.

When he had entered his house, he took a knife and, grasping his concubine, he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. (Judg 19:29)

In both word and deed, this grotesque act of butchery, performed by a Levite, certainly conjures human sacrifice, even if it is ultimately a non-sacral act.³⁰ But the degree and depravity of the Levite's violence is heightened in the Hebrew text, which, unlike the LXX, leaves open the possibility that the woman was still alive when she was dismembered—and ultimately killed—by the Levite.³¹

Shades of human sacrifice are even more evident in the case of Phinehas, a priest who lethally skewers two people and, as a reward for his violent zeal, is deeded by God with a covenant of eternal priesthood (Num 25:13). As Lauren Monroe and others have observed, the Phinehas narrative is suffused throughout with the language of human sacrifice.³² In a scene set in close proximity to the Tent of Meeting, Phinehas is said to spear his victims in their קבה, a rare noun which, as Monroe notes, only appears here and “in Deut 18:3, [where] it refers to a part of a sacrificial animal to be set aside for the Levite priests.”³³ Even more suggestively, the violent deaths of Zimri and Cozbi are said to have “atoned” (כפר) for the Israelites, a cultic outcome which points to how the killing “functioned virtually as a human sacrifice.”³⁴

JSOT 9 (1984) 37–59. Also making brief reference to the violence of the Levite as related to the Pentateuchal episodes mentioned above is David Moster, “The Levite of Judges 19–21,” *JBL* 134 (2015) 721–30, at 728. Cynthia Edenburg's careful diachronic study of the narrative does not specifically address the violence of the Levite within any wider literary or historical framework; see Cynthia Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole: Composition and Purpose of Judges 19–21* (AIL 24; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

²⁹ Cf. the five *waw*-consecutive verbs employed to describe the priestly violence of Phinehas (Num 25:7–8), which will be analyzed below.

³⁰ See Lauren A.S. Monroe, “Disembodied Women: Sacrificial Language and the Deaths of Bat-Jephthah, Cozbi, and the Bethlehemite Concubine,” *CBQ* 75 (2013) 32–52.

³¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (OBT 13; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 65–91, here at 79–80. This narrative certainly captures the “animalization” of human sacrifice, on which see Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 45–60, 81–82.

³² Lauren A.S. Monroe, “Phinehas' Zeal and the Death of Cozbi: Unearthing a Human Scapegoat Tradition in Numbers 25:1–18,” *VT* 62 (2011) 211–31, here at 220–21. See also Tatlock, “Human Sacrifice,” 42; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 285; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 213.

³³ Monroe, “Phinehas' Zeal,” 221. See also S. C. Reif, “What Enraged Phinehas? A Study of Numbers 25:8,” *JBL* 90 (1971) 200–206, esp. 204–206.

³⁴ Levine, *Numbers*, 290. See also the exceptional use of כפר in 2 Chr 30:18.

Perhaps detecting this very idea, a rabbinic exegetical tradition dating to the third century CE reflects clear discomfort with the atoning effect of the biblical text.³⁵

וַיִּכְפֹּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: לִכְפֹּר לֹא נֹאמַר כִּאֲנִי אֵלֶּה וַיִּכְפֹּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. שְׂעֵד עֲכָשְׁיוּ לֹא זֶה אֵלֶּה
עוֹמֵד וּמְכַפֵּר עַד שִׁיחִיו הַמֵּתִים.

And he atoned for the Sons of Israel: “To atone” is not written, but rather “he will atone.” For until this moment [Phinehas] has not moved; but rather he is standing and making atonement until the dead come to life. (Sifre Numbers 131)

This passage reads against the grain of the biblical text and in doing so functionally decouples Phinehas’s lethal interpersonal violence from the resulting atonement.³⁶ The rabbis accomplish this by repointing the biblical text to re-read the received וַיִּכְפֹּר (“and he atoned”; perfective tense) as the imperfective וַיִּכְפֹּר (“and he will atone”). With this re-reading, the atonement effected by Phinehas is ongoing and is disconnected temporally from the events of Num 25. It is likely that this otherwise unnecessary and exegetically superfluous textual emendation is driven by an awareness of, and discomfort with, the efficacious human sacrifice implied by the text.

Nevertheless, that the rabbis went out of their way in this instance to read against the grain and suppress this tradition does not make it disappear. Within a millennium of this latter text we find a “recovery” of the human sacrificial valence in a rabbinic midrash:

וְכִי קָרְבַּן הַקָּרִיב שֶׁנֹּאמַר בּוֹ כִּפְרָה? אֵלֶּה לְלַמֵּד שֶׁכֹּל הַשּׁוֹפֵךְ דַּמָּן שֶׁל רָשָׁעִים כְּאֵלוֹ הַקָּרִיב
קָרְבַּן.

Did [Phinehas] offer a sacrifice, that the verse should refer to atonement? Rather, [this word] teaches you that whoever spills the blood of evildoers—it is as if he has offered a sacrifice. (Num. Rab. 21:3)

Whereas the Sifre was so concerned with the insinuation that Phinehas perpetrated human sacrifice that it went so far as to “change” the biblical text, this later tradition does just the opposite: it establishes that Phinehas’s slaying was indeed perceived as a form of human sacrifice. Both sources, however, share a linkage between—if not an outright identification of—interpersonal priestly violence and human sacrifice.

³⁵ *Siphre D’Be Rab* (ed. H.S. Horowitz; Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1966) 173. Translation is mine.

³⁶ On discomfort and decoupling elsewhere in Jewish literature on the violence of Phinehas, see David A. Bernat, “Josephus’s Portrayal of Phinehas,” *J SOP* 13 (2002) 137–49, esp. 140; idem, “Phinehas’ Intercessory Prayer: A Rabbinic and Targumic Reading of the Baal Pe’or Narrative,” *JJS* 58 (2007) 263–82, esp. 282. On wider rabbinic disapproval of Phinehas’s violence, see Laliv Clenman, “‘It Was Not According to the Will of the Sages’: Halakhic and Aggadic Responses to Pinhas’ Killing of Zimri and Kozbi in Numbers 25,” in *Vixens Disturbing Vineyards: Embarrassment and Embrace of Scriptures: Festschrift in Honor of Harry Fox* (ed. Tzemah Yoreh; Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010) 169–91; Miller, “Phinehas’ Priestly Zeal.”

■ Priestly Violence and Animal Sacrifice

An alternative to the human sacrificial thesis has been offered by Gideon Aran, who notes that priestly violence is linked with the violence inflicted against *animals* in the sacrificial cult.³⁷ In other words, violence begets violence and need not be confined to any singular realm.³⁸ If there are actions that are representative of the duties of the Israelite priestly cult, foremost among them would be the violent labor of slaughtering, butchering, and flaying animals, as well as the blood manipulations which follow.³⁹

While Aran does not elaborate further, his brief observation unwittingly taps into what Amy Fitzgerald, Linda Kalof, and Thomas Dietz have labeled the “Sinclair hypothesis,” i.e., the notion that “the propensity for violent crime is increased by work that involves the routine slaughter of other animals.”⁴⁰ When extrapolated to priestly violence, one could argue that the constant slaughter of animals as part of the Temple cult is associated with the interpersonal violence so closely intertwined with the priesthood.⁴¹

³⁷ Gideon Aran, “The Other Side of Israelite Priesthood: A Sociological-Anthropological Perspective,” in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History? On Jews and Judaism Before and After the Destruction of the Second Temple* (ed. Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss; Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 78; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 43–58.

³⁸ In addition to the inherent violence of slaughter, animal abuse in slaughterhouses has been documented in Temple Grandin, “Behavior of Slaughter Plant and Auction Employees Toward the Animals,” in *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence: Readings in Research and Application* (ed. Randall Lockwood and Frank R. Ascione; West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1998) 434–42; see also Gail A. Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997) 87–88, with particular reference to interpersonal violence.

³⁹ This is not to say that the Israelite sacrificial cult is wholly violent or that the traditional category of “sacrifice” is inherently violent. These issues are well argued in Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). Nonetheless, it is difficult to accept McClymond’s contentions that animal slaughter would not have been traumatic to onlookers (60) or that the “apportionment” (a euphemism she prefers over “dismemberment” or “butchery”) is somehow divested of violence because it occurs after the animal is killed (132). On the use of language to advance the “invisibility” of violence in meat production, see Piers Beirne, “Thericide: Naming Animal Killing,” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 3 (2014) 49–66, here at 53–54; see also Nik Taylor and Heather Fraser, “Slaughterhouses: The Language of Life, the Discourse of Death,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Animal Abuse Studies* (ed. Jennifer Maher, Harriet Pierpoint, and Piers Beirne; London: Palgrave, 2017) 179–99.

⁴⁰ Amy J. Fitzgerald, Linda Kalof, and Thomas Dietz, “Slaughterhouses and Increased Crime Rates: An Empirical Analysis of the Spillover From ‘The Jungle’ Into the Surrounding Community,” *Organization & Environment* 22 (2009) 158–84, quote from 159. See also Arnold Arluke, Jack Levin, Carter Luke, and Frank Ascione, “The Relationship of Animal Abuse to Violence and Other Forms of Antisocial Behavior,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 14 (1999) 963–75; Piers Beirne, “From Animal Abuse to Interhuman Violence? A Critical Review of the Progression Thesis,” *Society & Animals* 12 (2004) 39–65; Grandin, “Behavior of Slaughter,” 434–35.

⁴¹ I should note that the act of slaughter is not reserved solely for the priesthood. Slaughter by the layperson bringing a personal *olah* offering is seemingly indicated in Lev 1:3–5; on which see Feldman, *Story of Sacrifice*, 56–58. On Levite slaughter, see above, n. 27.

The Sinclair hypothesis, notably, is the reverse of René Girard's scapegoating theory of sacrifice, according to which sacrifice functions as a way to channel violent impulses *away* from the communal realm.⁴² The purpose of sacrifice, according to Girard, is to suppress "internal violence," that is, "all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community."⁴³ Following the Sinclair hypothesis, on the other hand, it is the violence of slaughter that spills over into the communal setting and generates interpersonal violence away from the slaughterhouse.

While we do not have access to the social *realia* behind the text (and some might dispute whether there is one to be accessed) the biblical narrative as we possess it nonetheless provides us with memories of members of the priesthood engaging in interpersonal violence both before and after they are charged with the work of cultic slaughter. If, indeed, we associate priestly violence with sacrifice, it behooves us to consider why priests should be depicted as violent before they are ever engaged in the sacrificial cult. Along these lines, we can model two competing hypothetical possibilities:⁴⁴ 1) are priests portrayed as violent because their vocation is one of animal slaughter (i.e., there is a spillover effect from the workplace)?; 2) or, were priests apportioned the work of animal slaughter because of a predisposition to interpersonal violence, real or imagined?⁴⁵

⁴² Rejecting Girard's universal theory of sacrifice does not negate every individual argument within the theory; my focus here is specifically on the potential for sacrifice to serve as a deflectionary mechanism for violence. For a similar acknowledgment from one of Girard's fiercest critics that individual portions of the theory may still bear value, see Jonathan Klawans, "Something Bigger than Girard," *BSR* 45:3–4 (2016) 23–27, esp. 26. See also Klawans's more focused critique of Girard in his *Purity*, 22–26. Klawans's accusation that Girard is "antipriestly" may indeed be true, but the "cadre of guilty priests" who are said to be "lurking in the background" of sacrificial rituals does have some resonance in the biblical text, as I have shown above (quotes from Klawans, *Purity*, 25).

⁴³ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 8.

⁴⁴ Similar questions modeling the causality of, and/or predisposition toward, violence have been raised regarding 1) the on-field violence of American football and the rising tide of domestic violence incidents among National Football League players; and 2) violent incidents associated with veterans of the armed forces who have returned from combat tours. On the NFL, see Michael Welch, "Violence Against Women by Professional Football Players: A Gender Analysis of Hypermasculinity, Positional Status, Narcissism, and Entitlement," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 21 (1997) 392–411. On veterans, see Deirdre MacManus et al., "Aggressive and Violent Behavior Among Military Personnel Deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan: Prevalence and Link With Deployment and Combat Exposure," *Epidemiologic Reviews* 37 (2015) 196–212; Deirdre MacManus et al., "Impact of Pre-Enlistment Antisocial Behaviour on Behavioural Outcomes among UK Military Personnel," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 47 (2012) 1353–58.

⁴⁵ Norbert Lohfink observes, for example, that the putative lack of a sacrificial cult in Deuteronomy should be understood in light of the ritualized and quasi-sacrificial destruction of the Seven Nations. See Norbert Lohfink, "Opferzentralisation, Säkularisierungsthese und mimetische Theorie," in *Studien zum Deuteronomium und zur deuteronomistischen Literatur* (5 vols.; SBAB 20; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1995) 3:219–62.

■ Soldiers at God's Service

Perhaps furthering the possibility of a predisposition to violence is a synchronic reading of the Hebrew Bible which shows distinct links between the Levites and episodes of interpersonal violence that *pre-date* the institution of a centralized sacrificial cult. The most notorious of these episodes are Levi serving as co-instigator and primary perpetrator of a massacre of the defenseless, just-circumcised, males of Shechem (Gen 34), and the Levite-led fratricide following the Golden Calf apostasy (Exod 32:26–27). These texts are joined by a series of recurring military motifs attached to the Levites. In a physical sense, it has been noted that the layout of the Tabernacle bears a striking resemblance to Rameses II's military encampment.⁴⁶ At the center of the Tabernacle is the Ark of YHWH, which is deployed in wartime as the “palladium that heralds the deity's might and scatters his enemies.”⁴⁷ One of the priestly garments, the *ephod*, was even said to have cloaked a sword (1 Sam 21:10), a tangible representation of how the priesthood was literally wrapped up in violence.⁴⁸

Moreover, the labor of the Levites in and around the Tent of the Meeting is equated with military service, a significant subtlety that has been practically erased in translation. Numbers 4:23 frames the call-to-ritual-duty of the Gershonite Levites as nothing short of a military mobilization: *כל הבה לצבא צבא לעבד עבדה באהל מועד*: (lit. “All who muster to labor in the Tent of Meeting”).⁴⁹ A similar move is seen in Deut 33:11, where Moses calls upon God to bless the Levites, His “soldiers” (חילו), and to “crush the loins of his adversaries, of those that hate him, so that they do not rise again.”⁵⁰ The juxtaposition of this blessing to the mention of sacrificial work in the previous verse leads Leuchter to contend that these verses “make the case that traditional sacerdotal responsibilities . . . constitute Levitical vigilance.”⁵¹

Associations between war and the sacred classes would continue to accumulate in both biblical and post-biblical literature.⁵² In 1 Chronicles (9:17–27), the Levites are described as gatekeepers, “guardians of the thresholds of the tent” (v. 19), a role described as that of “armed guards about the Tabernacle with the authority and the means to put any trespasser to death” or a “paramilitary inner city security

⁴⁶ See Michael M. Homan, *To Your Tents, O Israel! The Terminology, Function, Form, and Symbolism of Tents in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (CHANE 12; Leiden: Brill, 2002) 111–16.

⁴⁷ Leuchter, *Levites*, 74.

⁴⁸ See C. Mark McCormick, “From Box to Throne: The Development of the Ark in DtrH and P,” in *Saul in Story and Tradition* (ed. Carl S. Ehrlich and Marsha C. White; FAT 47; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 175–86, esp. 178.

⁴⁹ Cf. KJV: “all that enter in to perform the service, to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation”; NRSV: “all who qualify to do work in the tent of meeting.”

⁵⁰ Leuchter, *Levites*, 89–90. The militaristic sense is again here lost in translation, with most modern translations following the KJV in rendering חילו as “substance.”

⁵¹ Leuchter, *Levites*, 90.

⁵² Whether these portrayals are grounded in historical events pre-dating the Hebrew Bible we cannot know for certain. Cf. the approach of Leuchter, *Levites*, 74.

force.”⁵³ By the late Second Temple period, we encounter dedicated wartime roles imagined for the priesthood in the Qumran War Scroll and, not long thereafter, in the rabbinic office of the Priest Anointed for War (כהן משוח מלחמה).⁵⁴

Collectively, this constellation of texts suggests that interpersonal violence with militaristic valences is intertwined with priestly identity, especially, although not exclusively, for the Levites. A number of cultic and/or sacrificial connotations to this violence serve to reinforce this connection; but, at the same time, there is a discernible distance between these acts of violence and the physical cult itself. Given that many of these traditions are portrayed as pre-dating the institution of the centralized Temple cult, a Girardian view of the deflectionary role of sacrifice may find some plausibility in these texts.

■ The Priest, in the Temple, with the Knife

An alternative (or perhaps adjunct) to the Girardian view articulated above is the notion that sacrifice might cause a spillover of violence into the interpersonal realm. Assessing this avenue of inquiry is admittedly difficult. While there is no lack of legal texts which speak of the technical components of priestly sacrifice, there is little in the way of descriptive or narrative accounts of the inner-workings of this process in the Jerusalem Temple.⁵⁵ To the extent that contemporaneous accounts of Jewish Temple activity do exist, they are fragmentary at best and embellished fantasy at worst.⁵⁶

Exemplifying this difficulty are the portrayals of the Temple cult in rabbinic literature. For one, these texts are not contemporaneous; the earliest strata of the relevant sources post-date the cessation of the sacrificial cult by a minimum of 150 years.⁵⁷ Moreover, many scholars assume a skeptical stance when it comes to assessing the historicity of rabbinic traditions about the Temple, rendering

⁵³ See, respectively, Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology* (NES 14; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 15; John Wright, “Guarding the Gates: 1 Chronicle 26:1–19 and the Roles of Gatekeepers in Chronicles,” *JSOT* 48 (1990) 69–81, at 69.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., m. Sotah 8:1. See Nils Martola, “The Priest Anointed for Battle,” *Nordisk Judaistik* 4.2 (1983) 21–40.

⁵⁵ Biblical texts narrating slaughter and butchery include Ex 29:17; Lev 1:6, 17. On the paucity of slaughter instructions in biblical and rabbinic texts, see McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence*, 58–60.

⁵⁶ For a survey of the sources, see Joshua Schwartz, “Sacrifice Without the Rabbis: Ritual and Sacrifice in the Second Temple Period According to Contemporary Sources,” in *The Actuality of Sacrifice: Past and Present*, (ed. Alberdina Houtman et al.; Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series 28; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 123–49.

⁵⁷ On the gap between the destruction of the Temple and the disproportionate rabbinic interest in the sacrificial system, see Mira Balberg, *Blood for Thought: The Reinvention of Sacrifice in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017). The rabbis do display a great interest in animal anatomy insofar as it relates to ritual slaughter, but they appear to have relied heavily on the knowledge of professional butchers. See Tzvi Novick, “‘I Am Not a Butcher’: Authority and Expertise in Rabbinic Laws of Meat Production in Classical Rabbinic Literature,” *JAJ* 8 (2017) 112–44.

it difficult to separate possible nuggets of *realia* from aspirational rhetoric.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, rabbinic literature presents a consistent picture of the Temple as a locus of interpersonal violence and, in unprecedented fashion, gives us a vivid, descriptive view of the Temple's slaughterhouse operation. It is therefore significant that the rabbis also recognized, appropriated, and embellished the motif of priestly violence.⁵⁹

One tradition merging these themes presents a dispute—albeit an anachronistic one—between the rabbis and the Temple priests. The question up for debate was whether the priests could drain the huge volume of blood from slaughtered animals on the Sabbath, which the rabbis ruled against:⁶⁰

למה פוקקין את העזרה והיו מפקיעין הכהנים בדם עם רכובותיהן? אמרו לו שבח הוא לכהנים שיהו מפקיעי' בדם עם רכובותיהן.

Why did they plug up the Temple Court [drain] and leave the priests up to their knees with blood? They said to him: it is a mark of praise for the priests that they soak up to their knees in blood. (t. Pisha 4:12 [MS Wien, Hebr. 20])

This picture of blood-soaked priests is unprecedented, and it serves as a reminder of the graphic nature of animal slaughter which, in most sources, is either passed over or otherwise concealed.⁶¹ Indeed, an earlier document, *Aramaic Levi*, articulates

⁵⁸ These issues are well addressed in Naftali S. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Mnemohistory is a productive theoretical lens for understanding how and why the rabbis preserved and deployed the motif of priestly violence, this despite their distance from the biblical text and the sacrificial cult of the Second Temple. As Jan Assmann has written, memory is “the ongoing work of reconstructive imagination,” and the mediation of the past “depends on the semantic frames and needs of a given individual or society within a given present” (*Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997] 14). This approach is well-suited to rabbinic narratives, which are the final product of an extended and collective process of both oral and written discourse. Thus, while the rabbis were not making *historical* recollections of priestly violence, the *cultural* framework of this motif was helpful for advancing their sense of collective identity, as I have argued elsewhere (Miller, “Phinehas’ Priestly Violence”). On the discursive modes of rabbinic literature, see, e.g., Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, “Recent Literary Approaches to the Mishnah,” *AJSR* 32 (2008) 225–34; Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Orality, Narrative, Rhetoric: New Directions in Mishnah Research,” *AJSR* 32 (2008) 235–49; Annette Yoshiko Reed and Natalie Dohrmann, “Introduction: Rethinking Romanness, Provincializing Christendom,” in *Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire* (ed. Natalie Dohrmann and Annette Yoshiko Reed; Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) 1–21. On the discursive modes of the motif of priestly violence in rabbinic literature, see Miller, “Phinehas’ Priestly Violence.”

⁶⁰ See also y. Pesahim 5:8 (32d); b. Menahot 103b (regarding pilgrims), and other parallels cited in Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta* (12 vols.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962) IV:565.

⁶¹ See Andrea Beth Lieber, “Where is Sacrifice in the Heavenly Temple? Reflections on the Role of Violence in Hekhalot Traditions,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1998 Seminar Papers* (2 vols.; SBLSPS 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998) 1:432–46, here 438–39. On the “invisibility” of violence in the modern slaughterhouse, see Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

the great lengths to which some priestly groups went (or aspired) in order to “avoid all contact with blood.”⁶²

While the violence of sacrifice is only implicit in the above text, other rabbinic sources take priestly violence straight to the heart of the sacrificial cult. According to the Mishnah, the daily duties of priests in the Temple were initially performed on a first-come-first-served basis. Indeed, the Mishnah (Yoma 2:1) relates how priests “would run and ascend the ramp” of the altar, and “whoever reached within four cubits [of the altar] ahead of his fellow” would win the privilege to perform the ritual duty. But we are then told the following cautionary tale:

מעשה שהיו שנים שווים ורצים ועולין בכבש דחף אחד מהן את חברו ונשברה רגלו וכשרא
בית דין שיקו באין לידי סכנה התקינו שלא יהו תורמים את המזבח אלא בפייס.

It once happened that two [priests] were tied while running and ascending the ramp, and one pushed his fellow, and he fell and his leg was broken. As soon as the Court recognized that they were coming to danger, they ordained that the clearing of the ashes from the altar be [assigned] solely by lottery. (m. Yoma 2:2, MS Kaufmann)

Regardless of the historicity of this story and the resulting rabbinic enactment, its preservation (or creation for etiological use) by the rabbis reinforces the notion that priests are prone to interpersonal violence, even within the Temple itself and even on the sacred altar. But as the augmented parallel to this story makes clear, this incident was neither an accident nor an occupational hazard:⁶³

מעשה בשנים כהנים שהיו שוים רצים ועולים בכבש. דחף אחד מהן את חברו לתוך ארבע
אמות. נטל סכין ותקע בו בלבד.

It once happened that two priests were tied while running and ascending the ramp, and one pushed his fellow into the four cubits. He took a knife and plunged it into [the other’s] heart. (t. Yoma 1:12, MS Wien)

This text is the apotheosis of priestly violence: a priest fatally stabbing another priest not only within the sacred precincts of the Temple but in the midst of the sacrificial service. The very ramp on which the butchered parts of the slaughtered animal is placed is made into the location for a cold-blooded killing.⁶⁴ Moreover,

⁶² See Liane M. Feldman, “Sanitized Sacrifice in Aramaic Levi’s Law of the Priesthood,” *JAJ* 11 (2020) 343–68. See also the priestly avoidance of the defiling blood of war in the Qumran War Scroll (1QM IX:7–9), as well as the numerous traditions from late antiquity (Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan) grappling with the ritual purity status of Phinehas (collected in Miller, “Sacred Slaughter,” 156).

⁶³ See also t. Shevu’ot 1:4; Sifre Numbers 161; y. Yoma 2:2; b. Yoma 23a.

⁶⁴ Richard Kalmin has illustrated at length how elements of this Temple vignette would later become the foundations of an entirely different narrative, that of “Zechariah and the Bubbling Blood,” with characters and motifs not seen here. But this should not obscure the overt priestly violence of the early narrative. See Richard Lee Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud’s Narratives and Their Historical Context* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014) 130–63.

elements in the continuation of this narrative suggest that the stabbing was done with nothing less than a *sacrificial* knife, inviting human sacrificial associations as well.⁶⁵ This narrative does not exclude the Girardian-like view of a priestly predilection towards violence. Indeed, the rabbis were unsparing in their caricatures of hot-headed priests, from the young priests who are to smash the skulls of Temple trespassers (m. Sanh. 9:6) to the lengthy hypothetical treatment of a priest who seizes by force what he deems to be a firstborn animal (b. B. Metṣ 6b).⁶⁶ That said, the sacrificial elements in the narrative combined with (what the rabbis saw as) an incident necessitating an enactment in the interest of personal safety may be seen as reflective of a view that the violence of cultic “work” can, indeed, spill over into the interpersonal realm.

■ Conclusion

It would take until the medieval period for a reader of the biblical text to weigh in with a definitive statement on the meaning of the motif of priestly violence. As noted above, in the violent conclusion of the Golden Calf affair, a Levite-led fratricide claimed the lives of three thousand Israelites. Following the report of the casualties, Moses issues a cryptic blessing to the Levites:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מִלֹּא יְדַכְּם הַיּוֹם לִיהוָה כִּי אִישׁ בָּבְנוּ וּבֵאֵחָיו וּלְתַת עֲלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרַכָּה

And Moses said, “Fill your hands this day to the Lord, for each of you has been against son and brother, that He may bestow a blessing upon you today.” (Exod 32:29; cf. Deut 33:8–11)

While this blessing is famously difficult to interpret, the language of “filling of the hands” elsewhere marks investiture into the priesthood. Why a violent fratricide should be connected with the priesthood in the first instance should now be clear. Indeed, Rashi, the Jewish exegete of the eleventh century, comments on this verse as follows:

מִלֹּא יְדַכְּם: אִתְּם הַהוֹרְגִים אוֹתָם, בְּדַבָּר זֶה הִתְחַנְּכוּ לִהְיוֹת כַּהֲנִים לְמִקְוֶם.

You have filled your hands: You, who have killed [the Israelites]—with this [action] you will have been trained to become priests for the Omnipresent.⁶⁷

While not elaborating any further, it is clear in light of the foregoing analysis that Rashi viewed violence as an inherent component of priesthood. Indeed, there is

⁶⁵ Josephus has a similar narrative (*Ant.* XI.297–301), albeit with a brotherly rivalry for the high priesthood motivating the violence. While the killing takes place in the Temple, there are no other sacrificial valences to the narrative, and consequently I have bracketed it. On the relationship(s) of this narrative to the rabbinic text, see Tal Ilan et al., *Josephus and the Rabbis* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsevi, 2017) 1:237–40 (Hebrew).

⁶⁶ See Baitner, *Priests are Irritable* for additional examples.

⁶⁷ Cf. Leuchter (“Mushites,” 489): “those [Levites] who were successful in battle proved themselves fit to be divine representatives.”

little utility for interpersonal violence as training for the priesthood unless one views the sacrificial cult itself as violent.⁶⁸

In sum, one need not have definitive answers to intractable questions regarding the dating and development of the Israelite priesthood to recognize the presence and prevalence of the motif of priestly violence in biblical and post-biblical literature. It is clear, moreover, that subordinating the topic of priestly violence to compositional issues (and vice versa!) has inhibited our ability to achieve a fuller understanding of priestly self-fashioning.⁶⁹ Legitimate pushback against anti-clericalism and anti-ritualism in biblical scholarship may likewise have had a chilling effect on the study of the darker sides of the priesthood and sacrificial cult. This study hopefully marks the beginning of a wider-ranging conversation about breaking through the hagiographic tradition that has accompanied the Israelite priesthood over the past two millennia.

⁶⁸ The violence of sacrifice is likewise alluded to in Sifre Deuteronomy 165 and, in more developed fashion, in *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* 47. See also Midrash Tannaim Deuteronomy 18; b. Hullin 134b.

⁶⁹ See Miller, "Phinehas' Priestly Violence."