**The Social Significance of Expressions of Hierarchy, Equality and Fraternity**

**in Rabbinic Traditions about Moses and Aaron from the Land of Israel**

**Abstract**

This article discusses rabbinic traditions about Moses and Aaron that address questions of hierarchy, status, envy, and fraternity between the brothers. This article suggests that considering the time periods and places in which traditions about Aaron were written adds a crucial dimension to understanding them. Analyzing the content of the traditions, alongside information about social and religious challenges of the era, illustrates social dynamics at the end of the Second Temple period and in the periods of the Mishna and Talmud. Such analysis reveals an aspect of the nature of the leadership crisis, and shows the positions and desires of the emerging heirs to the leadership. The historicist approach that constitutes the basis of the current article relies on the paradigm in the literature regarding Aaron’s character, allowing for optimal understanding of trends in treatment of these traditions among the Sages in the Land of Israel.

Key words: Priest, Moses, Aaron, Rabbinic literature, Priests’ status, Sages’ status,

Mishnaic and Talmudic periods

1. **Introduction**

The first encounter with the figure of Aaron in the Bible is a breath of fresh air for readers, who have witnessed difficult fraternal relationships during their reading of the family narratives in the book of Genesis. Aaron, Moses’ older brother, is set to receive the news of the appointment of his younger brother Moses, who has not personally experienced the nation’s misery with slavery, to be the official leader of the Israelites, while Aaron, the firstborn, will serve as his assistant. God does not allow Moses to feel concern about his meeting with Aaron, revealing to Moses what will transpire deep in his brother’s heart: “[God] said, ‘There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) The ensuing verses, which detail the brothers’ relationship, depict a rare collaboration without a trace of the elements of tension and jealousy which characterized, to such a great degree, the narratives about brothers in Genesis. [[2]](#footnote-3)The verses that deal with the brothers’ relations usually depict fraternity and collaboration in the national leadership without the elements of tension and jealousy that so strongly characterize the narratives about brothers in Genesis.[[3]](#footnote-4) A psalmist reinforces the beauty of this fraternal relationship in a psalm describing Aaron’s anointing, opening with the words: “How good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell together.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

In contrast to the biblical idyll of brotherhood, many rabbinic traditions associated with the figure of Aaron deal with issues of status and hierarchy, examining the nature of the brothers’ relationship, and even raising the possibility of envy between them—and not necessarily envy of the elder brother (Aaron) for the status of the younger (Moses), as we might expect.

In this article, we will discuss a collection of rabbinic traditions about Moses and Aaron, which are characterized by their addressing questions of hierarchy, status, and relations of envy and fraternity between the brothers. This article will suggest that understanding the characteristics of the periods in which the traditions about Aaron were written and their places of origin, adds an important and central dimension to understanding them. We will see that analyzing the content of the traditions alongside other sources of information about the social and religious challenges of the era and place in which they originated helps sketch a picture of the social dynamics at the end of the Second Temple period and the new hierarchy of status which emerged in the wake of the Temple’s destruction, and later in the periods of the Mishna and Talmud. Analyzing the traditions in this manner will reveal a hidden aspect of the nature of the leadership crisis, and will show the positions and desires of the emerging heirs to the leadership.

The historicist approach—which constitutes the basis of the current article and relies on the paradigm proposed in the literature regarding Aaron’s character—will allow an optimal understanding of the trends which attended the treatment of these traditions among the Sages in the Land of Israel. Participating in a social revolution, they were forced to explain its causes as well as justify their own actions.

* 1. *Hierarchy versus Equality in Descriptions of Aaron’s Status*

There is barely any discussion about the hierarchal relationship between Moses and Aaron in the Bible. The biblical text presents Aaron as the firstborn brother of Moses; as Moses’ future spokesperson before Pharaoh; as Moses’ partner in leadership of the nation; and as the person consecrated by Moses to serve as High Priest. The division of labor between Moses and Aaron places each of them as head of a hierarchy in his own respective domain of leadership: Aaron is the founder of the dynastic High Priesthood, and Moses is the master of all prophets. Most biblical narratives mention Moses as the recipient of God’s revelation, thus making it amply clear that the superior status belongs to Moses and that Aaron is subservient to him.[[5]](#footnote-6) Many rabbinic traditions are devoted to the issue of the relative status of these two figures. Some traditions present Aaron as being on par with Moses—a portrayal which does not dovetail with the sense that emerges about Aaron from most biblical verses—while other traditions attempt to emphasize Aaron’s subservience to Moses. Study of these traditions raises two questions: Why was it necessary to emphasize Aaron’s subservience to Moses, given that this relationship is already clear from the biblical text? And what is the significance of the contradiction between these two types of traditions?

In what follows we will juxtapose these traditions, which present conflicting messages regarding the question of the hierarchy between the brothers.

The formulation of God’s address to Moses is documented numerous times in the Bible. In some instances, Moses alone is addressed; in others, Moses is mentioned before Aaron; in one lone verse Aaron is addressed prior to Moses;[[6]](#footnote-7) and in five verses Aaron alone is addressed.[[7]](#footnote-8) The biblical text seemingly conveys a clear message with respect to the internal hierarchy of the brothers in all matters concerned with the responsibility of relaying divine messages to the nation. Some of the rabbinic traditions conceptualize the hierarchy of the brothers with a perspective similar to that of the biblical text.

A derasha which appears in the Sifra, and a parallel passage in the Sifrei on Numbers,[[8]](#footnote-9) compare those verses in which God addresses both Moses and Aaron with those verses in which God addresses Moses alone. The derasha emphasizes the unequal nature of the brothers’ leadership:

“[The Lord called to Moses and spoke] to him” (Lev 1:1)—to exclude Aaron. R. Judah b. Beterah said: There are thirteen instances of God speaking to Moses and Aaron in the Torah, and there are thirteen instances of exclusion, to teach you that none of these were said directly to Aaron, but rather to Moses, to be relayed to him. And they are the following […][[9]](#footnote-10) Aaron is excluded from being addressed at Mount Sinai. What does it say concerning the Tent of Assembly? “The Lord called to Moses”—it excluded Aaron from being addressed in the Tent of Assembly. R. Yossi the Galilean says: It mentions God speaking to Moses in three locations: In Egypt, on Mount Sinai and the entire Torah in the Tent of Assembly. What does it say concerning Egypt? “For when the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt.” It excluded Aaron from being addressed in Egypt. What does it say concerning Mount Sinai? “This is the line of Aaron and Moses at the time that the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.” It excluded Aaron from being addressed on Mount Sinai. What does it say concerning the Tent of Assembly? “The Lord called to Moses”—it excluded Aaron from being addressed in the Tent of Assembly. “Speak to Moses,” and not to Aaron.[[10]](#footnote-11)

The derasha points out key locations and areas where God addresses Moses exclusively, and it concludes that Moses is the exclusive teacher of the Torah. By contrast, a tradition in the Mekhilta, which expounds upon the language God uses to address Moses and Aaron in the first commandment they are instructed to teach the nation, reaches the conclusion that Moses and Aaron are equals:

“[and God spoke] To Moses and Aaron” (Exod 12:1)—why does it state this? Since it states: “The Lord said to Moses: See, I place you in the role of god to Pharaoh” (Exod 7:1). From this all I can deduce is that Moses was Pharaoh’s judge; from where can I learn that Aaron was there, as well? For this reason it states: “To Moses and Aaron,” juxtaposing Moses and Aaron. Just as Moses was Pharaoh’s judge, so too Aaron was Pharaoh’s judge. Just as Moses would state his message without fear, so too Aaron would state his message without fear.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Alternatively: “To Moses and Aaron”—I would think that whoever is prior in the text was prior in the actual event. However, since it states: “It is the same Aaron and Moses,” (Exodus 6:26) we are being told that they are equals. Similarly: “When God began to create heaven and earth” (Genesis 1:1)—I would understand that whichever is prior in the text was prior in the actual event. However, since it states: “When the Lord God made earth and heaven,” (ibid 2:4) we are being told that they are equals.[[12]](#footnote-13)

According to the exegete in the Mekhilta, the fact that Aaron is Moses’ partner in receiving the first commandment, and is mandated to teach it to the people alongside Moses, indicates that his leadership role is equal to that of Moses. Another exegete cites an alternative proof for this notion from the language of the biblical verse which summarizes the genealogy of Moses and Aaron’s family, as this genealogy places Aaron’s name prior to that of Moses.

Each of these two opposing ‘schools’ is faced with explaining biblical verses which seemingly contradict the conceptions they espouse: the ‘hierarchal school’ must account for those verses in which God addresses Moses and Aaron simultaneously, while the “equality school” must account for those verses in which God addresses Moses alone.

R. Ishmael and R. Achi express surprise at the apparent equality of Moses and Aaron in relaying the word of God, and they take pains to explain why Aaron is mentioned as a partner:

“Speak [second person plural] to the whole community of Israel.” (Exod12:3) Rabbi Ishmael says: Did they actually both speak? But doesn’t it already state: “And you [singular] shall speak to the Israelite people and say” (Exod 31:13)? Why then does it state “Speak [second person plural]”? The reason is that when Moses spoke, Aaron would bend his ear to listen in awe, and the text considers it as if he heard from the Holy One, blessed be He. R. Achi the son of R. Yosheya says: Did they actually both speak? But doesn’t it already state: “And you [singular] shall speak to the Israelite people and say”? Why then does it state “Speak [second person plural]”? The reason is that when Moses spoke, Aaron was to his right and Elazar was to his left and Ithamar was to the right of Aaron; and the speech emanated from amongst them, as if they were both speaking. R. Simon b. Yochai says: Moses would defer to Aaron and say ‘please teach me’, and Aaron would defer to Moses and say ‘please teach me’; and the speech emanated from amongst them, as if they were both speaking.[[13]](#footnote-14)

The phrase “as if they were both speaking” expresses the perspective of the authors of this tradition with respect to the brothers’ hierarchy: Moses is the one who delivers the word of God, while the text gives Aaron his due—for his humility and his dedication to Moses—by mentioning him as a partner of Moses in relaying God’s word to the nation.

How does the equality school account for the verses which indicate that God addresses Moses alone?

“And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying.” (Exod 12:1)—One might have understood from this that both Moses and Aaron were being addressed. However, since it states: “For when the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt” (Exod 6:26), it is clear that it is Moses who was addressed, and not Aaron. If so, why does the text state “to Moses and to Aaron”? Rather it teaches us that just as Moses was a party to the speeches, so too Aaron was a party to the speeches. And why wasn’t he addressed? Because of Moses’ honor. It turns out that Aaron is excluded from all of the addresses in the Torah with the exception of three instances, where it was not feasible.[[14]](#footnote-15)

According to this tradition, God spoke to both Moses and Aaron, even in those cases where only Moses is mentioned. Aaron is excluded from many of these addresses because of Moses’ honor. In both derashot the exegetes depict a discrepancy between what is depicted in the Bible and what supposedly actually took place, or was supposed to have occurred, in God’s speaking with the brothers. The hierarchal school defends Aaron’s honor; the equality school defends that of Moses.

The last tradition discussed above alludes to three places where Aaron is addressed without Moses, explaining that, despite the affront to Moses’ honor, it was necessary to describe these as being addressed to Aaron exclusively.[[15]](#footnote-16) These instances of God’s addressing Aaron exclusively are also subject to exegetical dispute by the two schools: Does Aaron’s being addressed directly imply that he stands atop a hierarchy in terms of a specific realm of commandments? Or is Aaron never a superior to Moses, and his being addressed ought to be explained in a different manner?

The first passage in which Aaron is addressed exclusively deals with Aaron and his sons’ role in safeguarding the purity of the Temple vessels. The second passage deals with priestly gifts. R. Ishmael expounds on the first time that Aaron is addressed:

“The Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons and the ancestral house under your charge [shall bear any guilt connected with the sanctuary; you and your sons alone shall bear any guilt connected with your priesthood]” (Num 18:1). Rabbi Ishmael says: Those[[16]](#footnote-17) who are in charge of the matter are the ones who are warned.[[17]](#footnote-18)

In other words, Aaron is addressed directly because this commandment belongs to the realm of priestly tasks.

The second address is expounded as follows:

“The Lord spoke to Aaron” (Num 18:8)—one might have understood from this that it was Aaron who was addressed. Therefore, it states: “It was to be a reminder to the Israelites, so that no man presume to offer […as the Lord had ordered him through Moses] (Num 17:5). We learn from this that it was Moses who was addressed, and he was to convey the message to Aaron.[[18]](#footnote-19)

The derasha proves that Moses is addressed from an earlier verse (Num 17:5), in which Moses is the one who is addressed directly. Seemingly, one could explain the difference between the two derashot as a function of the nature of the commandment in each case.[[19]](#footnote-20) However, examination of the biblical citations in the second derasha raises several difficulties.

1. The exegete’s proof text for the notion that initially it is Moses who is addressed (and that Moses then conveys the message to Aaron) deals with a different topic than the one which describes God speaking to Aaron.
2. The topic of the second derasha is priestly gifts, and we learned from the first derasha that Aaron is addressed directly in matters that are the responsibility of the priests.
3. The derashot of these verses are reversed in the Sifrei Zuta.[[20]](#footnote-21)

It would seem, therefore, that this is an extension of the dispute between the equality and hierarchal schools. Those who argue for the brothers having equal status would explain that, despite their equality, Aaron is addressed exclusively in matters that are clearly ritual or priestly related,[[21]](#footnote-22) while the hierarchal school would argue that even in matters that are clearly ritual or priestly related Moses is addressed prior to Aaron.

What is the background for this dispute about Aaron’s status? Why did a group of Sages feel a need to emphasize the hierarchal differences between Moses and Aaron, even when it is already clear from the plain sense of the text, and even in areas where Aaron seemingly possesses hierarchal superiority over Moses? And why did another group of Sages make such an effort to reinterpret the biblical text in order to prove the equality of the status of Moses and Aaron, even in matters of spiritual leadership?

Before answering these questions, we will offer our opinion on another aspect of the traditions about the relationship of the two brothers.

* 1. *Expressions of Fraternity in the Traditions about the Brothers’ Relationship*

Another unique characteristic of the rabbinic traditions dealing with Aaron is the great weight which they place on Moses and Aaron’s unique fraternal relationship: the great concern which each showed for the other’s dignity, the anguish each one felt over possibly damaging the other’s stature, and especially the brothers’ mutual joy at the other’s appointment as leader.

The description of the amicable fraternal relationship between Moses and Aaron does not contradict the biblical depiction. Moses and Aaron are the first positive example of two brothers treating each other with mutual respect, without envy, and leading the nation in partnership. It is not surprising, therefore, that this refreshing description of a cooperative fraternal relationship—in contrast to the narratives of envy and tension between brothers in Genesis—serves as an educational foundation for instilling the value of brotherhood.[[22]](#footnote-23) We will examine a number of these traditions and consider whether, aside from their central aim of instilling this value of brotherhood, these traditions harbor a hidden historicist aim which might be discerned, and how it might shed light on particular emphases of these traditions.

1.2.1Each Was Joyous of the Other’s Accomplishment

A number of derashot describe, in various ways, Aaron’s joy with Moses’ appointment as leader and Moses’ joy with Aaron’s anointment as High Priest. The biblical text describes Aaron’s joy at his first encounter with Moses (Exodus 4:14). The fact that the Sages saw a need to amplify Aaron’s reaction[[23]](#footnote-24) is understandable, as it is only natural for an older brother to be envious of his younger brother being appointed above him. Aaron’s joy is an exemplary model of a noble reaction, devoid of envy, in a situation where it might have developed. It is harder to understand the aim of the derashot which praise Moses for not being envious of Aaron’s appointment as High Priest. It would be unusual for an ordinary brother to be jealous in such a situation, let alone for Moses, who was humblest of men, and whose exclamation, “Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!” (Num 11:29) testifies to his generosity of spirit vis-à-vis his subjects’ rise to eminence.

The traditions which describe Moses’ relation to Aaron’s appointment attribute to him a range of reactions. On the one extreme, one tradition describes the appointment of Aaron as High Priest as a punishment for Moses’ refusing to accept the mission of delivering the Israelite nation out of Egypt:

R, Samuel b. Nahman said: During the entire week at the bush, God persuaded Moses to go on his mission to Egypt. This is what the verse states: “Neither yesterday nor two days ago, nor since You have spoken to Your servant.” (Exod 4:10) This refers to six days. On the seventh he said to Him: “Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.” (ibid. 4:13) The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: You are telling me “Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent”? By your life, I will wrap it in your cloak! When did He repay him? R. Berachyah cited R. Levi and R. Chelbo:

R. Levi said: During the entire first week of Adar Moses prayed and pleaded to be allowed to enter the land of Israel. On the seventh day, He said to him: “You will not cross this Jordan river”. (Deut 3:27) R. Chelbo said: During the entire week of Inauguration Moses served as High Priest, and he believed that the position was his. On the seventh day, He said to him: It is not yours, rather it is your brother Aaron’s. “On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons […].”[[24]](#footnote-25)

This midrash indicates that Moses was not satisfied with the role of leader, and that he believed that the High Priesthood was given to him as well.[[25]](#footnote-26) At the other extreme is a derasha which also offers an explanation for Moses’ refusal of the mission, though it claims that Moses’ refusal results from his belief that his brother is better deserving of the role of leading the people than is he. Before discussing this dersasha, we will examine some traditions which occupy a middle ground between these two derashot, the one of which describes Moses’ coveting the role of High Priest, the other his renouncing his appointment as leader in favor of Aaron.

The editor of the derasha in the Tanhuma, who interprets the language of the command to Moses to anoint Aaron,[[26]](#footnote-27) begins with a derasha relating that Moses is expecting to be given the role of High Priest. He then adds that Aaron is expecting the same thing. He continues with a description of Moses’ joy at discovering that the role is, in fact, being given to his brother:

There is a summons to eminence, as it states: “Moses called.” Moses said to him: The Holy One, blessed be He, instructed me to appoint you High Priest. Aaron replied: You toiled to create the Tabernacle, and I will be the High Priest?! Moses replied: By your life, even though you will be the High Priest, it is as if I will be; because just as you rejoiced in my eminence, so I rejoice in yours.[[27]](#footnote-28)

The depiction of Moses as coveting the role of High Priest is moderated, and instead Moses is depicted as rejoicing at the transfer of the role to Aaron.

There is further development in two other derashot. In order to neutralize the possibility that Moses be seen as envying Aaron because of the latter’s appointment as High Priest, Moses is depicted as being concerned for his brother’s status and distressed about the possibility of Aaron being slighted.

In the first derasha, Moses is distressed about the nature of Aaron’s role:

R. Levi said in the name of R. Chama b. R. Chaninah: Moses had tremendous anguish over this matter: Is it really dignified for my brother Aaron to examine afflictions? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: But doesn’t he benefit from it by receiving the twenty-four priestly gifts? As the saying goes: One who eats from the palm tree is pierced by its sharp points.[[28]](#footnote-29)

In the second derasha, Moses expresses distress and concern about the reduction of Aaron’s role due to his sons’ sin:

“And he shall not enter [the sanctuary] at any time.” R. Judah b. R. Simon said: Moses had tremendous anguish over this matter: He said: Woe is to me, perhaps Aaron has been pushed from his domain, … The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: It is not as you think. It is not a ‘time’ for an hour, nor a day, or a year, or twelve years, or for seventy years or forever. Rather he may enter whenever he wishes, as long as he follows this procedure.[[29]](#footnote-30)

The identical words, “Moses had tremendous anguish [*tsa’ar gadol*] over this matter,” appearing in both derashot, may indicate a relationship between them: they stress the fact that the spiritual leader, the scholar, recognizes the status of the priest and is concerned for his being slighted.

In a derasha in Song of Songs Rabba, Moses is described as appointing Aaron as an equal partner in the leadership of the nation, contrary to the hierarchy dictated to him by God.[[30]](#footnote-31)

In another derasha, in which the biblical text describes a tense situation between Moses and Aaron as a result of the burning of the sin offering sacrificed after the death of Nadab and Abihu, Moses is depicted as acknowledging his error and announcing that Aaron understands the halakhah better than he does.[[31]](#footnote-32)

And here we reach the place of the derasha at the other extreme: that is, the derasha which describes—in contrast to the derasha describing Moses’ belief that the role of High Priesthood is also guaranteed to him[[32]](#footnote-33)—Moses’ refusing to take even the role of leader because he believes that Aaron deserves it more than he does:

You should know that this is true, for you find that when The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: “Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh,” (Exodus 3:10) he replied: “Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.” (ibid. 4:13) Do you think that he was resisting going? He was only attempting to show honor to Aaron. Moses said: Until I was appointed, Aaron prophesized to them for eighty years, as it states: “When I made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt. (Ezek 20:5) […] He said: Aaron prophesized to them for all of those years, and now I will come and usurp his place, causing him anguish?! Therefore, he did not wish to go. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Your brother Aaron will not be upset by this, rather he will rejoice. You can see that this is so from the fact that he is coming out to your region, as it states: “Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you.” (Exod 4:14) Not only in his mouth, but even in his heart. His heart even more than his mouth, “and he will be happy to see you.” […] Once He told him this, he agreed to go. The Holy One, blessed be He, immediately appeared to Aaron and said to him: Go out and meet your brother Moses so that he will know that you are happy about it. Therefore it states: “Go to meet Moses in the wilderness.” This is the meaning of “If only it could be as with a brother,” like Moses and Aaron, who loved each other. “Then I could kiss you when I met you in the street,” (Song 8:1), “He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him” (Exod 4:27).[[33]](#footnote-34)

If we sum up the range of emotions reflected in the derashot dealing with Moses’ reaction to Aaron’s appointment as High Priest, the following stages emerge: Moses covets the role; Moses is instructed by God to anoint Aaron and is happy to carry out this command; Moses is zealous on Aaron’s behalf and protests the nature of the role or the diminishing of its authority; Moses bestows a portion of his own status on Aaron and turns him into his partner; Moses announces that Aaron understood the halakhah that was his responsibility better than he did; Moses wishes to forego the leadership role, believing Aaron to be more worthy.

1.2.2 The Oil on Aaron’s Beard

Two other derashot also indicate a transformation in the portrayal of Moses’ emotions at the time of Aaron’s anointment as High Priest. These derashot deal with the verse in Psalms which describes the oil dripping down Aaron’s beard. The earlier tradition describes Moses’ concern regarding misappropriation of the sacred oil which trickled onto Aaron’s beard (a misuse of oil intended exclusively for anointment) and God’s subsequent reassurance:

They said that when Moses poured the anointing oil onto Aaron’s head, he recoiled and it fell backwards. He said: Woe is to me, as I misappropriated [*ma’alti*] the anointing oil! The Holy Spirit answered him: “How good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell together. It is like fine oil on the head running down onto the beard, the beard of Aaron, that comes down over the collar of his robe; like the dew of Hermon that falls upon the mountains of Zion.” Just as the dew of Hermon is not subject to misappropriation, so too the anointing oil is not subject to misappropriation.[[34]](#footnote-35)

This earlier derasha is cited in a later tradition, albeit with an added section which has no parallel in Tannaitic literature:

“It is like fine oil on the head running down onto the beard, the beard of Aaron.” (Ps 133:2) Did Aaron really have two beards, that it says ‘onto the beard, the beard’? Rather, when Moses saw the anointing oil which flowed down Aaron’s beard, he rejoiced as if it flowed down his own beard.[[35]](#footnote-36)

These two traditions present opposite descriptions of Moses’ mental state when he anointed Aaron for his priestly role: recoil, concern and panic in the former; joy and serenity in the latter. Both states were the result of the oil poured on Aaron’s beard during his anointment.

What is the significance of these differences in terms of Moses and Aaron’s relationship? Why did the Sages feel the need to prove that Moses originally desired Aaron’s role? Why is Moses described as worrying that he misappropriated the oil during the anointment? And why did the Sages emphasize Moses’ joy at the time of the anointment—embellishing it in other derashot—along with his concern for Aaron’s status and honor?

In what follows we will suggest historical, social answers to the main issues that emerge from our analysis of these traditions about the relationship of Moses and Aaron:

1. The contradiction between traditions describing a structured hierarchy in the brothers’ roles, as opposed to traditions describing equal status between them.
2. The significance of the wide range of emotions in Moses’ psyche toward Aaron’s appointment to the High Priesthood, and toward the division of labor between them.
3. **The Significance of Social Changes in the Status of the Priesthood for Understanding the Traditions**

*2.1 Aaron as a Paradigm in Post-Biblical and Ancient Christian Literature*

The conventional wisdom in scholarship is that late biblical and post-biblical traditions dealing with the figure of Aaron serve as a sort of seismograph for measuring the degree of support for, or opposition to, the status of priesthood in a given era on the part of a contemporary group of writers.[[36]](#footnote-37) Thus, for example, while one can certainly infer Ben Sira’s admiration for Simon the Righteous (the High Priest in Ben Sira’s day) from his direct discussion of Simon,[[37]](#footnote-38) one can just as clearly deduce his position from the place and space he devotes to the figure of Aaron in his survey of the nation’s Patriarchs.[[38]](#footnote-39) Feldman attributes Josephus’ great fondness for the image of Aaron in his Antiquities of the Jews[[39]](#footnote-40) to Josephus’ own priestly extraction, in which he took great pride.[[40]](#footnote-41) Josephus’ Aaron embodies his own social outlooks, which trace the selection of a leader not solely to his origin but also due to his singular capabilities. Josephus elaborates beyond the biblical account to explain Aaron’s credentials as a person and as a prophet as the motive for his selection.[[41]](#footnote-42) Thus he dismisses the charges of nepotism. It cannot be ruled out that he remarked about Aaron in this manner in order to neutralize similar criticism of him by his opponents.[[42]](#footnote-43) Aaron’s sins (the sin of the Golden Calf and his participation in Miriam’s complaint) and the fact that he was allowed to retain the High Priesthood clash with Josephus’ outlook on leaders being selected due to their moral probity; accordingly, he chose to omit these narratives. Conversely, Feldman explains Josephus’ negligible discussions of narratives concerning Aaron’s positive actions, as a consequence of his own political perspective on autocratic rule without partners—the accepted form of government in the Greek and Roman cultures of his day.[[43]](#footnote-44) Use of the designation “the sons of Aaron” in the Qumran literature is explained by Hempel as pointing to a transformation in the role attributed to those in the sect who were perceived as being replacements for the priests.[[44]](#footnote-45) The role of ritual leadership which the descendants of Aaron filled in the Temple was now assumed by the sect’s new “sons of Aaron” (later to be replaced by the designation “sons of Tzaddok”). Their messianic role in the End of Days is also described in this manner.[[45]](#footnote-46) The early Christian opposition to the Temple and the priesthood is reflected in many citations in the New Testament.[[46]](#footnote-47) The most explicit expression of such opposition appears in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which mentions the preference for Melchizedek’s priesthood over that of Aaron. Melchizedek, rather than Aaron, is understood as a designation for the High Priest who foreshadows the figure of Jesus.[[47]](#footnote-48)

#### In accordance with this outline posed by scholars, how would the figure of Aaron be treated in Pharisaic traditions from the Second Temple period, under the assumption that he serves as a reflection of the corrupt priesthood of that time, whose representatives violate the law of the Pharisees? What would be the significance of the development of traditions about Aaron during the periods after the destruction of the Temple, during which time the role of the priests was gradually shrinking, and their status was radically changing?

2.2*Changes in the Status of the Sages and the Priesthood, and Its Expression in the Traditions*

Finkelstein and Kahana, in their commentary on “To exclude Aaron,”[[48]](#footnote-49) propose that the aim of the derasha—which emphasizes the hierarchical relationship between Moses and Aaron—is to expropriate the priests’ role as the transmitters of Torah and its interpretation, and to emphasize the role of the Sages, represented by the prophecy of Moses, as the exclusive transmitters of Torah and its interpretation for all time. Finkelstein believes that this derasha about hierarchy suggests a polemic against the Sadducean priests of the exegete’s generation.[[49]](#footnote-50)

The attribution of the derasha in the Sifra to Judah b. Beterah, and that in the Mekhilta “We are being told that they are equals,”[[50]](#footnote-51) in several of the parallels, to R. Elazar b. R. Simon, supports this theory.[[51]](#footnote-52) Judah b. Beterah (whether this refers to the first one or the second) lived several generations before R. Elazar b. R. Simon, at the end of the second Temple period or immediately thereafter in generation of Jabneh.[[52]](#footnote-53) R. Elazar b. R. Simon lived at the end of the period of the Tannaim.[[53]](#footnote-54) Religious tensions with the priesthood reached their zenith at the end of the Second Temple period, when the Sadducean priests aspired to establish their status and to assume the role of religious leadership.[[54]](#footnote-55) On the other hand, the years following the destruction of the Temple, and the large shift away from Jerusalem after the Bar Kokhba revolt, took a heavy toll on the status of the priesthood.[[55]](#footnote-56) Despite the fact that many priests continued to conduct themselves in an aristocratic manner and were amongst the wealthiest citizens,[[56]](#footnote-57) their aspiration to dominate religious leadership did not pose a real threat to the growing status of the Sages. The need to distinguish Moses’ status from that of Aaron was critical at a time when the hierarchy of sage and priest was being challenged. However, in an era when the status of the priesthood did not present a real religious challenge, the Sages had no qualms about highlighting the common denominator between the two positions. The verses quoted in the derasha in the Sifra about Aaron’s exclusion all discuss God’s revelation to Moses when he is separate from Aaron, and in which Moses receives practical instructions for guiding the people to implement the divine command. These verses support the hypothesis of Finkelstein and Kahana with regard to a separation of the priests from transmitting of the laws of the Torah.

Kahana suggests that the derasha of the Sifrei Num 117, 332(above p.8)—which explains that although the text indicates that the command was addressed to Aaron, it was actually first said to Moses—also aims at emphasizing the ultimate authority of the Sages, even in the realm of the Temple ritual and priestly gifts, as part of the battle against the Sadducees.[[57]](#footnote-58) Perhaps the opposing tradition Sifrei Num116, 332 (above p.8)—which explains Aaron’s being addressed first as an indication of his being solely responsible for matters of purity—expresses the efforts of R. Ishmael (who was among the descendants of a High Priest) in favor of the ritual status of his offspring, even in the absence of the Temple?[[58]](#footnote-59)

The disparity between the two presentations of Moses’ emotional stance at the sight of the oil dripping down Aarons beard[[59]](#footnote-60) is an additional expression of the positive change that occurred as a result of distance in time from the trauma of the priestly service at the end of the Second Temple period. Moses’ halakhic anxiety, as described in the earlier derasha in the Sifra (“[Moses] recoiled and it fell backwards. He said: Woe is to me, as I misappropriated [*ma’alti*] the anointing oil!”), likely betrays the concern—which accompanied Temple service during the tense periods at the end of the Second Temple era—about the status of the priesthood; Moses’ joy, as described in the Talmudic derasha, depicts a reality of comfort and trust between the two classes.

The widespread preoccupation with descriptions of the hierarchy between Moses and Aaron in the rabbinic traditions that we have analyzed is, in all likelihood, suggestive of the culmination of a dramatic upheaval in the conception of the leadership hierarchy among the community in the Land of Israel. The dominant status of the priests through the course of the Second Temple period, a result of their role as centralizers of the religious cult, waned in a reality without a temple. The priests, who represented the religious leadership, struggled to maintain a hold on the functions of this leadership, which served as a substitute for the Temple cult,[[60]](#footnote-61) and even struggled to continue enjoying the privileges of those in service to the people. The Sages’ dissatisfaction with the actions of the priests, already during the Second Temple period, led to the Sages’ opposition to the continuation of lineage as a basis for religious leadership. The Sages pointed to eminence in Torah study, as well as morality, as criteria that ought to replace lineage for those contending for religious leadership.[[61]](#footnote-62) The assimilation of this upheaval among the population is expressed in traditions about Aaron, which pose two conceptions: a conception desiring continued leadership from the priests alongside new leadership from the Sages, and a conception desiring the Sages as exclusive heirs of leadership functions, with the priests’ subordinate to them in all realms of the religious worship.[[62]](#footnote-63) It is difficult to answer the question of whether these were two parallel conceptions, or if there is evidence of a positive change that occurred in relation to the status of priests over the generations, an outcome of the distance in time from the trauma of the Second Temple’s destruction and a neutralization of reservations about its priests.[[63]](#footnote-64) Nevertheless, the fact that all hierarchy derashot are attributed to the Mishnaic-era stages and are altogether unmentioned in derashot from the Talmudic literature indicates that fear of shared leadership has been neutralized with the passage of generations and the retreat into the past of the leadership polemics of the late Second Temple period.

*2.3 The Neutralization of Status Struggles in the Fraternity Traditions*

The glaring dominance of derashot featuring fraternity in describing Moses’ and Aaron’s relationship may indicate the great difficulty in neutralizing the suspicion and tension which arose over time between the status of the Sages and that of the priesthood. The purpose of the derashot concerning the relationship between Moses and Aaron was not to critique the aspects of suspicion and tension. On the contrary, it was to teach that even amongst the patriarchs of status and lineage, expressions of suspicion and tension played a role. However, these derashot highlight the idyll that managed to overcome past tensions and foster a relationship of true brotherhood, with each brother rejoicing in the other’s appointment and being concerned about his recognition. In contrast to the hierarchy derashot that are dispersed in the Tannaic literature, the fraternity derashot occur in the midrashic literature of the Talmudic era in the Land of Israel. The passage of time from the trauma of the destruction of the Temple to the social struggles that erupted in its aftermath attenuated the tension, institutionalized the hegemony of the sages of the Sanhedrin, and made it possible to restore the priests’ status and even to re-acknowledge their advantage in the ritual domain. The emphasis on Moses’ joy over Aaron’s appointment as High Priest, taken for granted in the biblical narrative, required reinforcement and emphasis in the social reality of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods, a time in which the status of the priests was eroding and calls to abolish it were heard from the various strata of society.

The aspiration of ousting the priests from their position and taking over their role—expressed in several traditions in the Talmud and aggadic midrashim[[64]](#footnote-65)—is not lacking in the derashot describing Aaron. This can be seen in their depiction of Moses’ expectation that he would be appointed High Priest. That this thought was in error is highlighted in derashot which describe the process undergone by Moses, culminating with his insistence that Aaron be appointed publicly, in order to emphrasize that he was chosen by God:

“On the eighth day Moses called [Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel].” And why ‘the elders of Israel’? In order to promote him before the elders. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Summon the elders and appoint him in their presence, lest the Israelites say that he appointed himself High Priest. Therefore, ‘and the elders of Israel.’[[65]](#footnote-66)

Even if human opposition is justifiable—having developed over the course of generations during which the priests did not succeed in justifying their election and their contribution to the religious-spiritual leadership of the community—it is important to remember that this was an eternal divine selection, witnessed by the Sages of Israel.

In the traditions of the Sages of the Land of Israel from the end of the Second Temple period until the Talmudic period, Aaron serves as a reflection of the changes that occurred in the status of the priests. Besides giving representation to the suspicious, critical stance that sought to oust the priests, he especially represents reconciliation and the need to re-establish the role of religious, ritual leadership, alongside the leadership of the Sages, the teachers of Torah. The choice of Aaron as a paradigm for conveying these messages was intended to remind people of the purity and holiness that underpinned his position and role, and by means of it to strengthen the dominant messages of forgiveness for past differences, and rebuilding of the position under the inspiration of the person who once headed it.

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Our tracing of the traditions about Moses and Aaron’s relationship, as presented in this article, enables us to outline an additional dimension to the image presented by various scholars describing the changes to the status of the priesthood from the end of the Second Temple to the Talmudic period. The scholars’ image presents: the priesthood as a typological group possessing common characteristics; the suspicious attitude of the Pharisees towards their Sadducean comrades during the end of the Second Temple period;[[66]](#footnote-67) the desire that arose among groups of Sages to take over the priests’ role in religious leadership from the period following the destruction of the Temple and afterwards;[[67]](#footnote-68) the social crises among strata of elite priests for the popular leadership of the Sages,[[68]](#footnote-69) and the Sages’ fight during the Talmudic period for leaving the priests with status and functions, even after the people had become accustomed to conducting their lives without worship in the Temple.[[69]](#footnote-70) The additional dimension presented by the derashot about Aaron dismantles this complete picture, takes one of its elements—the image of Aaron the priest as a representative of the priesthood for all generations—and by means of it highlights the complexity of the aspects that the scholars detailed.

The intense preoccupation of the derashot about Aaron with the question of the hierarchy between him and Moses, so alien to the biblical descriptions of Moses’ humility on the one hand, and Aaron’s complete acceptance of Moses’ leadership on the other, should inspire listeners and learners of the derashot throughout the ages to identify their social situation, which must be located in the period of their creation. A proper understanding of this situation, and an analysis of the derashot in consideration of it, reveals the complex position of the Sages, who needed to redefine the leadership hierarchy and to define its authority, without trampling on the dignity of the leadership whose greatness had just waned and had lost most of its functions.

The repeated emphasis, in the traditions about Aaron, of there being a tapestry of fraternal connections between the brothers moderated the struggles of hierarchy, and it directed contemporary rivals to adopt these fraternal practices, despite changes in the population of the hierarchy of those with leadership status.

The broad development of Aaron’s character, as we have surveyed in this article, is based mainly on traditions from the Land of Israel, which are found in compositions of the Land of Israel from the periods of the Mishanh and the Talmud. This fact, in and of itself, proves the connection between the development of the derashot and the changes in the status of the priesthood in the Land of Israel. Aaron, as a prototype for the status of the priesthood, did not interest the Sages of Babylonia, who established other hierarchies of leadership, and who did not contend with the tension that was created in the generations after the destruction of the Temple by the decline of the priests, who continued aspiring to hold onto the reins of leadership despite their downfall. The Sages of the Land of Israel, as heirs to the spiritual leadership, had to fight for their status; to justify the process of ousting priests; and to prove that they continued to have respect for Aaron’s work and his descendants: peace lovers who draw people close to Torah.[[70]](#footnote-71)

1. Exod 4:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Moses and Aaron, for example, cooperate fully as they present themselves before Pharaoh and as they divide the making of the “signs”: “Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded” (Exod 7:20). Moses responds furiously to the attempts of Korah and his sect to challenge Aaron’s status and reproves them for thinking they deserve a status parallel to his (Num. 16:4–11). Moses’ defense of Aaron causes the dispute to escalate into one that challenges Moses’ leadership as well. The test of the staffs, undertaken at Moses’ initiative, is meant to demonstrate Aaron’s chosenness even before Moses addresses himself to the vile complaints lodged against him. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Even Moses’ reproach to Aaron for the latter’s role in the sin of the golden calf sin aims to reduce the degree of Aaron’s guilt, focusing on the grave acts of the nation, which left Aaron no choice:

   “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” (Exod 32:21). The exceptional narrative is Aaron’s participation in Miriam’s complaint about the Kushite woman whom Moses has taken. Aaron’s and Miriam’s allegation in regard to this act as such is accompanied by questioning of Moses’ leadership, [מנהגו?] ostensibly elevating them to equal status: “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? they asked. Has he not also spoken through us?” (Num. 12:2). Here, tension against the background of personal rivalry does seem to exist. However, the fact that Miriam is mentioned first and is the one who is punished appears to show that Aaron has been dragged into seconding the allegation and may not view the matter exactly as does Miriam. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ps 133:1. On the aims of the psalm and the significance of its mention of Aaron, see M. Weiss, *Ideas and Beliefs in the Book of Psalms* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2001), 176–181 [Hebrew]; on descriptions of fraternity and an assessment of their historical significance in the period when the psalm was written, see: E. Assis, “Family and Community as Substitutes for the Temple after Its destruction: New Readings in Psalms 127 and 133,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 85(1) (2009): 55–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. On the mention of Moses and Aaron in the historical speeches of Samuel and Psalms as having led the nation of Israel side by side with equal status, and the reason for this, see Y. Zakovitch, “And the Lord Sent Moses and Aaron,” *Birkat Shalom 1* (2008): 191–199. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. This will be discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Exod 4:27; Lev 10:30; Num 18:1, 8, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. M. Kahana, *Sifrei on Numbers: An Annotated Edition* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2011), 58, 146–147 [Hebrew]. In his edition of the Sifrei, Kahana points out that the language of the Sifrei is more ancient, using as proof the greater degree of detail in citing verses in the Sifra as compared to the Sifrei. See ibid., 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Concerning the uncertainty regarding the enumeration of the thirteen verses of inclusion and exclusion to which Rabbi Judah ben Beterah refers, see: K. Kahanah, “Thirteen Statements that Moses Said to Aharon” in *The Leo Jung Jubilee Volume,* eds. Menachem M. Kasher, Norman Lamm, and Leonard Rozenfeld(New York: The Jewish Center, 1962), 107–119 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Sifra, Dibura De-Nedava* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See the expanded formulation in the reconstituted *Mekhilta De-Rashbi* 12, based on the text of the Midrash HaGadol in J. Epstein and E. Melamed (eds.), *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on ben Yohay* (Jerusalem, 1955), 7 [Hebrew]: “[…] And I may yet say that God spoke to Moses outside of the city, but when Moses spoke to Aaron he did not speak to him outside of the city. For this reason it states: ‘*And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron (in the land of Egypt)*.’ It juxtaposes speaking to Moses and speaking to Aaron. Just as addressing Moses took place outside the city, so, too, Aaron took place outside the city. Just as in the case of Moses, he was addressed using the formula ‘*thus spoke.*’ so too in the case of Aaron, he was addressed using the formula ‘*thus spoke*.’ Just as Moses was in the role of God to Pharaoh, stating his message without fear, so too Aaron was in the role of God to Pharaoh, stating his message without fear. Just as Moses was treasurer in charge of the red heifer and of the lighting oil and of the anointing oil and of the aromatic incense; so too Aaron was treasurer in charge of the red heifer and of the lighting oil and of the anointing oil and of the aromatic incense. It states: ‘*And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron (in the land of Egypt)*’ in order to teach that Aaron’s eminence is juxtaposed to that of Moses.” The addition which equates Aaron’s role to that of Moses in the service of the Tabernacle alters the message of the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*. The derasha of the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* increases Aaron’s status in the leadership of the nation, equating it to that of Moses. By contrast, the addendum addresses Aaron’s role in the temple ritual and argues for equality between Aaron and Moses even in this role. Although this reading ostensibly depicts equality, it actually better reflects the “hierarchal school,” as we will see below, as it implies that even in those areas relating to his sphere of responsibility in which Aaron had predominance, there was equality between him and Moses. By contrast, no examples are given here of areas of equality in Torah leadership or in the transmission of God’s words to the people. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael Masekhta De-Pisha* 1. For parallels, see: *Gen. Rab*. 1:1, 14; *Lev. Rab.* 36:1, 826˗35. A derasha with a similar message explains the changes in the order in which the sons of Jacob are mentioned in various lists: “This is that which R. Joshua of Sachnin explained in the name of Reish Lakish: Why aren’t the names of the tribes listed in the same order everywhere, but instead sometimes this one comes first and sometimes the other? So that one not say that the sons of the mistresses come first and the sons of the maidservants are last. This teaches us that these were not greater than those.” (*Exod. Rab*. 1:6, ed. Shinan 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael Masekhta De-Pisha* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael Masekhta De-Pisha* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. There are actually five places where Aaron is addressed alone. However, it would seem that the derasha refers to those places where he is addressed in the context of a command. Concerning the content of the verses and their selection from amongst the others, see ed. Horovitz, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. The reading of the phrase *“Do not those*” is based on several textual witnesses. The commentators of the midrash attempt to interpret this difficult text. It would appear that it actually means “it is his.” See Kahana, *Sifrei on Numbers* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2011), 4, 862 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *Sifrei Num* 116, 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Ibid., 117, 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. In other words, the first verse deals with the realm of priestly authority, whereas the second does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. The derasha on the earlier verse is: “You can conclude that all of the statements made to Aaron were conveyed to him by Moses” (Sifrei Zuta Num 18:1) The derasha on the latter verse is: “The commandment was said to Aaron” (Sifrei Zuta Num 18:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. See footnote 8 concerning the version in Midrash HaGadol citing the derasha of the *Mekhilta De-Rashbi*. There, too, the proof for the brothers’ equality comes from commandments which belong to the realm of priestly authority: “Just as Moses was treasurer in charge of the red heifer and of the lighting oil and of the anointing oil and of the aromatic incense; so too Aaron was treasurer in charge of the red heifer and of the lighting oil and of the anointing oil and of the aromatic incense.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Indeed, the exegete in *Tanḥuma* opens with a description of the idyll between Moses and Aaron: “‘O that you were like a brother to me.’ (Song 8:1) Israel is saying to the Holy One, blessed be He: if only you could be like a brother to me. Like which brother? You find that from the beginning of the creation of the world, until now, brothers have hated each other. Cain hated Abel and killed him, as stated, ‘Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.’ (Gen 4:8) Ishmael hated Isaac, as stated, ‘Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing’ (Gen 21:9), and ‘playing’ can only mean that he sought to kill him, as stated, ‘Let the young men come forward and play.’ (2 Samuel 2:14) And Esau hated Jacob, as stated, ‘And Esau said to himself…’ (Gen 27:41) And the tribes hated Joseph, as stated ‘They hated him.’ (Gen 37:4) So like which brother? Like Moses and Aaron, as stated, ‘How good and pleasant it is…’ For they loved each other and were fond of each other. When Moses received the kingship and Aaron the high priesthood, they were not jealous of each other; rather, they each rejoiced in the greatness of the other.” (*Tanḥ*  (2) 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. See, for example: “Rabbi Yitzhak bar Maryon said: The Torah teaches a good rule of conduct, that when a person performs a good deed, he should do it with a happy heart […] If Aaron had known that the Holy One would write of him, ‘Even now [Aaron] is setting out to meet you, and he will be glad in his heart” (Exodus 4:14), Aaron would have gone out to greet him with drums and dancing. […]” (*Lev. Rab. Behar* 34:8, 790; and in parallels); “How do we know that Aaron rejoiced at Moses’ greatness? As it is stated: ‘Even now [Aaron] is setting out to meet you, and he will be glad in his heart” (Exod 4:14). Rabbi Simon son of Yohai taught: ‘The heart which rejoiced at the greatness of his brother Moses will wear the Urim and Thummim, as it is written, ‘Inside the breastpiece of decision you shall place the Urim and Thummim, so that they are over Aaron’s heart.’” (*Song Rab*. 1. 1:10; and its parallel in *Tanḥ* (2) 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. *Lev. Rab.* 1:6, 226–228. Parallels: *Song Rab*. 1:3 with variations in the names of the sages; *Midr. Tanaim* 18:26; *Tanḥ* (B) Shemini 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. See also the derasha in *Tanḥ* (B) Hukkat 21, 21, which suggests that Moses actually tried to serve in this role: “Rabbi Tanhum son of Rabbi Judan said: All seven days Moses served in the High Priesthood, but the Divine Presence did not rest on his hands. But when Aaron came and served in the High Priesthood, the Divine Presence rested on his hands. This is what is written, ‘For today the Lord will appear to you’ (Lev 9:4).” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Lev 9:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. *Tan**ḥ* (2) Shemini 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. *Lev. Rab*. 15:8, 37. See the explanation of ed. Margaliot (ibid., 337–338): “The intention of this proverb is to say that whoever receives favor and pleasure from something must also bear the bad consequences involved with it.” For the educational aspects of this derasha in relation to the role of leaders who need to get their hands dirty with menstrual blood and the blood of fetuses and placenta, see: B. Elitzur, “Current Topics and Biographical Influences in the Interpretation of the Sin of Nadav and Avihu in Rabbinic Literature,” *Masechet* 6 (2007): 209–211 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. *Lev. Rab.* 21:7, 483. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. *Song Rab.* 1. 1:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. *Lev. Rab.* 13:1, 272 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. *Lev. Rab.* see above, p.) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. *Tanh.* (2) 24. Parallel: *Tanh.* (V) Exod 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. *Sifra Shemini* 1; *Tanh*. (VI) ; Exod 27 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. *Lev. Rab.* 3:6, 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Those who believe that this tendency begins already in late biblical literature argue that Aaron’s figure is presented in accordance with the challenges of the return of Zion in the deuteronomistic literature and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. See P. Guillaume, “Exploring the Memory of Aaron in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Period Yehud,” *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods* (2013), 95–105; and J.W. Watts, “Scripturalization and the Aaronide Dynasties,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 13 (2013): 1–15. See B. L. Visotzky, *Reading the Book* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 11, who notes changes in the image of Aaron going back to the book of Deuteronomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. See Ben Sira 50, which is dedicated in its entirety to praise of Simon the Great, son of Johanan. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. See F. V. Reiterer, “Aaron's polyvalent role according to Ben Sira,” *Rewriting Biblical History* (New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 27–56, and especially 46–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. See *Antiquities of the Jews* Shalit, ed. (Jerusalem, 2002), 3.188: “[…] God appeared to Moses and commanded him to give the High Priesthood to his brother Aaron, as his piety (and his righteousness) grant him greater right than all (other people) to obtain this honor.”; and later on (3.190): “But now God Himself has decided that Aaron is worthy of this honor, and has chosen him to be priest, as He knows that he is the most righteous among us […] (3.192): For (indeed) Aaron was the worthiest of them all for this honor, due to his lineage and (the spirit of) his prophecy, and because of his brother’s praiseworthy attributes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. As evidenced by his remarks in the opening of his autobiographical work. See *Life of Joseph* D. Schwartz, trans., (Jerusalem 2007), 63: “My family is absolutely not an unexceptional one; rather, it descends from priests for generations. Every nation has a different basis for affiliation with the nobility, and among us membership in the priesthood is an indication of a magnificent pedigree […].” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. See *Antiquities of the Jews 3.189–192.* [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. See, for example, Josephus, *The Life,* [trans. D. Schwartz (Jerusalem, 2006, pp. 103, 198]. [השארתי את פרטי המהדורה העברית] Whiston’s English translation: <https://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/autobiog.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. See L. Feldman, “Josephus’ Portrait of Aaron,” *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg* (1996), 167–192. By and large, Feldman describes the way the persona of Aaron challenges Josephus. Aaron’s status and the acts attributed to him in the Bible create a clash with several of major fundamentals in Josephus. Josephus’ perception of the criteria for the selection of leaders on the basis of their credentials, as against Aaron’s appointment on the grounds of his being Moses’ brother, with no credentials revealed; the importance of the leader’s rhetorical prowess as against the need to mobilize Aaron as Moses’ spokesman; Aaron’s retention of the High Priesthood despite his grave participation in the sin of the golden calf, which collides with the perception of retribution that Josephus stresses quite often in his writings; and the shaping of the persona of Aaron in a way that reinforces his personal capabilities and avoids description of his participatory role in many biblical narratives, are some of the solutions that he offers for the clash of fundamentals. The choice of omitting narratives that do not square with his outlook is interesting in view of the Sages’ creation of an imagined hierarchy between Moses and Aaron in order to reinforce the status of the former, as I show below. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. On the opposition of the sect to the Jerusalem priests, see R. A. Kugler, “Priesthood at Qumran”, *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years II* (1999), 93–116; ibid, “The Priesthood at Qumran: The Evidence of References to Levi and the Levites,” *The Provo International Conference* (1999), 465–479. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. See C. Hempel, “The Sons of Aaron in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Flores Florentino* (2007), 207–224; ibid, “Do the Scrolls Suggest Rivalry between the Sons of Aaron and the Sons of Zadok and if so was it Mutual?” *Revue de Qumran* 24, 1 (93) (2009): 135–153. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. See I. Gruenwald, “From Priesthood to Messianism: the Antipriestly Polemic and the Messianic Factor”, *Messiah and Christos* (1992): 75–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. For further details see: W. Horbury, “The Aaronic priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews”, *Messianism among Jews and Christians* (2003), 227–254; D. W. Rooke, “Jesus as Royal Priest: Reflections on the Interpretation of the Melchizedek Tradition in Heb 7,” *Biblica* 81 (1) (2000): 81–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. *Sifra, Dibura De-Nedava*, above p. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. L. Finkelstein, *Introduction to the Safra Edition* (New York, 1989), 23 [Hebrew]; Kahana, *Sifrei on Numbers*, 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael Masekhta De-Pisha* 1 (above, p.) [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. It is so in the version in Bereishit Rabba. The credibility of the attribution is questioned by some scholars, who claim that it is not possible to draw conclusions about period of a tradition period from its attribution to one sage or another. See for example: J. Neusner, “What's in a Name? The Problematic of Rabbinic ‘Biography,’” *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978): 72–96; J. Neusner, “Evaluating the Attributions of Saying to Named Sages in the Rabbinic Literature,” *JSJ* 45 (1994): 28–51; L. Jacobs, “How much of the Babylonian Talmud is Pseudepigraphic?” *JJS* 28 (1977): 46–59. And also the remarks of Neusner, J. Neusner, “Mishnah and Messiah,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 14 (1984): 3–11, who argues that, in identifying aims of these traditions, heavier weight ought to be placed on the period when they were edited than on the period of the Sages to whom they are attributed. In light of these reservations, our suggestion is therefore stated with necessary caution. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. See A. Hyman, *History of Tannaim and Amoraim, vol. 2*. (London, 1910), 555 – 557 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Ibid., vol. 1, 210–214. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. See E. Regev, *The Sadducees and Their Law* (Jerusalem, 2005), 291–330 [Hebrew], and the bibliography therein. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. G. Alon, *History of the Jews in the Land of Israel in the Mishnah and Talmudic Periods* , vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1967), 14ff; S.W Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* VII (Philadelphia 1958), 259, n.36; A. Büchler, Die Priester und der Kultus im letzten Jahrzehnt des Jerusalemischen Tempels, (Wien, 1895), 16–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. See: R. Kimelman, “The Priestly Oligarchy and the Disciples of the Sages in the Talmudic Period,” *Zion* 48 (1983): 135–147 [Hebrew]; M. Beer, “On leaders of the Jews of Tzippori in the Third Century,” *Sinai* 74 (1974):133–138 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Kahana, *Sefrei on Numbers*, 885. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Kahana believes that the change between the second derasha in the Sifrei (117) and the second dersaha of the Sifrei Zuta also results from controversy over the status of the Sages in the realm of ritual. We do not know who the author of the derasha in Sifrei Zuta, however, the conjecture of Kahana reinforces the hypothesis that the contradicting derashot express a controversy among the Sages about the limit of the priests’ authority. On hidden controversy in midrashic commentary in the literature *midrashei halakhah*, see D. Boyarin, “Analogy vs. Anomaly in Midrashic Hermeneutic: Tractates Wayyassa and Amaleq in the Mekilta,” *JAOS* 106 (1968): 660–666. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Sifra Shemini 1 and *Lev. Rab.* 3:6; above p. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. On the continued activity of the priests after the destruction of the Temple, and on the mystical substitute they found after being rejected from continuing to fulfill the roles of spiritual leadership, see: R. Elior. *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. See I. Gafni, “On New Leadership Patterns in the Talmudic Period in the Land of Israel and in Babylon: Tribe and Legislature,” *Priesthood and Kingship* (1987), 79–91 [Hebrew]; H. Birenboim, “‘A Kingdom of Priests’: Did the Pharisees Try to Live Like Priests?” in [*Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History?*](http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/9789004217447) eds. [D. Schwartz](http://www.brill.com/search?search_author=Daniel%20R.%20Schwartz) and [Z. Weiss](http://www.brill.com/search?search_author=Zeev%20Weiss) (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 59–68. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. The second possibility—absolute, unshared rule with Moses as the leader and Aaron as his subordinate—is a better fit for the common perception in the Second Temple period and adjacent generations in the Greek and Roman non-Jewish milieu, as manifested in Josephus’ total omission of biblical accounts in which Aaron is mentioned as Moses’ partner in leadership (see Note 40 [האם מיספור זה עדיין בתוקף?] above). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. See O. Irshai, “The Place of the Priesthood in Jewish Society at the End of the Period of Antiquity,” *Continuity and Permutations*, I. Levin, ed., (Jerusalem 2004), 67–106 [Hebrew]. Irshai describes a positive change that occurred in the status of priests in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, as they again took over the leadership of the Sages and the leadership of the Davidic line. The rabbinic literature written by the Sages does not document this change, though it is possible to draw conclusions about it from the letters of non-Jews, *piyyutim*, and archaeological discoveries. In his article, Irshai also presents the position of those who disagree with this hypothesis.

    In this context, it is interesting to consider the *piyyut* of Rabbi Eleazar ben Kalir, which describes Moses’ words of supplication aimed at preventing his death. God mentions the righteous ancestors of Moses, who were sentenced to death, and asserts that if they died, then Moses’ sentence also is to be death. Moses’ does not accept God’s words and responds by describing his superiority over each of them. One of those righteous men is Aaron, thus described by God:

    As for my servant, who closely resembles a divine angel

    And who performs his duties in an eternal priesthood—

    He died, yet you should not die?!

    To which Moses answers him:

    It is right that he would die

    For he did not descend into the thick cloud, accepting what was two thousand years old.

    S. Elitzur, *A Poem for Every Parsha*, (Jerusalem, 2006), 328–329 [Hebrew].

    Moses believes he has a clear advantage over his brother—who is compared in his appearance to a divine angel—due to his having been the only to become covered by a thick cloud and receive the Torah (which preexisted creation by two thousand years). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. For example, see the narrative in Y. Shabbat 12:3 13a; on the social significance of this narrative, see Kimelman, “The Priestly Oligarchy,” and Tanhuma (B) Korah 5. And see B. Elitzur, “Characteristics of Opposition from the Periods of the Second Temple, the Mishnah and the Talmud in Sermons on the Controversy of Korakh,” *Netuim* 19 (2004): 67–68 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. *Tanh.* (2) Shemini 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. See L. Levine, “The Political Struggle Between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the Hasmonean Period,” in *Chapters in the History of Jerusalem in the Days of the Second Temple,* eds. A Oppenheimer, U. Rappaport, and M. Stern (Jerusalem, 1981), 61–83 [Hebrew]; J. Neusner, “The Mishnah's Conception of the Priesthood: the Aggadah versus the Halakhah”, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 14 (1) (2011): 92–107; D. R. Schwartz, “Law and Truth: On Qumran-Sadducean and Rabbinic Views of Law,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls, Forty Years of Research,* eds., D. Dimant and U. Rappaport (Leiden, Brill 1992), 229 – 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. See Kimelman, *Oligarchy*; G. Alon, “Sons of the Sages”, *Studies in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud, vol. 2*, (Tel Aviv Israel: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1956), 58–73; M. Beer, “The Sons of Eli in Rabbinic Legend”, *Bar Ilan 14-15* (2001): 79–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. See Gafni, “On New Leadership Patterns,”; M. Beer, “On the Leaders of Jews of Tzippori in the Century in the Third Century,” *Sinai* 74 (1974): 133–138; A. Beitner, *The Priests are Angry* (Tel Aviv, 2015), 44–58; R. Hammer, “The Apotheosis of Aaron”, *Conservative Judaism*, 53 (1) (2000): 20–33; H. Bamberger, “Aaron: Changing Perceptions” *Judaism* 42 (2) (1993): 199–213. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. See Elitzur, “Characteristics of Opposition”, 67–68; and Birenboim, “A Kingdom of Priests,” 59–68. Birenboim disagrees with Neusner’s assumption that the Sages tried to build for themselves a status similar to that of the priests. Birenboim proves in the article that the Sages built their status on teaching the Torah and its laws, and that they did not aspire to inherit the priests’ role in religious worship or their social status. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Compare M. Avot 1:12, which praises Aaron as a lover and pursuer of peace, with the narrative in B. Yoma 71b: the narrative describes the people’s preference for escorting the popular Shemaiah and Abtalion over the High Priest, who has emerged from the Temple in all of his splendor. Shemaiah and Abtalion’s statement there establishes acts of peace as a higher ethical value than exalted pedigrees: “May the descendants of Gentiles, who emulate Aaron’s actions, come in peace.” [↑](#footnote-ref-71)