**The traditions concerning Aaron, and their contribution to understanding the changes in the status of the priesthood at the end of the Second Temple period and in the generations following the Temple’s destruction**

A study of the portrayal of Aaron in rabbinic aggadic midrashim raises a major question. The biblical Aaron, having secured the role of patriarch of the high priesthood, represents ritual leadership, entrusted with the central tasks of serving in the Temple, offering sacrifices and atoning for the sins of the nation. In the extant rabbinic midrashim, however, descriptions or elaborations of Aaron’s ritual role in the Temple and in the sacrificial order barely leave a trace. Instead, traditions depict Aaron’s unique qualities, his hierarchal status relative to Moses, the special fraternal relationship between the two brothers and, of course, deliberate as to the extent of his culpability for the sin of the Golden Calf.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The conventional wisdom in scholarship is that later biblical and post-biblical traditions dealing with the image 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.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, for example, while one can certainly infer Ben Sira’s admiration for Simon the Righteous (the High Priest in his day) from his direct discussion of Simon;[[3]](#footnote-3) his position can just as clearly be deduced from the place and space he devotes to the image of Aaron in his survey of the nation’s Patriarchs .[[4]](#footnote-4) Feldman attributes Josephus’ great fondness for the image of Aaron in his *Antiquities of the Jews*[[5]](#footnote-5) to Josephus’ own priestly extraction, in which he took great pride.[[6]](#footnote-6) Feldman uses this to explain Josephus’ decision to omit the narratives concerning Aaron’s sins (the sin of the Golden Calf, his conversation with Miriam concerning the Kushite woman and the sin of *Mei Merivah* [the water of contention]). 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.[[7]](#footnote-7) 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.[[8]](#footnote-8) 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.[[9]](#footnote-9) The early Christian opposition to the Temple and the priesthood is reflected in many citations in the New Testament.[[10]](#footnote-10) The most explicit expression of this appears in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which mentions the preference for the Melchizedek’s priesthood of over that of Aaron. Melchizedek, rather than Aaron, is understood as a designation for the High Priest who foreshadows the image of Jesus.[[11]](#footnote-11)

If we are to follow this model proposed by researchers, how will Aaron’s image be treated in the pharisaic traditions from the second Temple period—assuming these reflects the corrupt priesthood of their time, whose representatives desecrated the pharisaic halakha? Given the shrunken role and dramatic change in the status of the priesthood after the Temple’s destruction, what will the meaning of the evolving traditions concerning Aaron be?

In this article, we will explore the unique aspects of the midrashic traditions concerning Aaron, in an attempt to depict the social dynamic during the end of the second Temple period, and to describe new hierarchy of status in the wake of the Temple’s destruction and later in the periods of the Mishna and Talmud.

**The limited freedom of the traditions dealing with Aaron**

In his book, *החייבים במקרא וזכאים בתלמוד ובמדרשים*,[[12]](#footnote-12) Margulies noted the common phenomenon of significant differences between the presentation of biblical figures in the biblical text and the presentation of biblical figures in rabbinic sources. Sometimes the Sages paint the biblical figures more negatively than they appear in the text; other times, they exonerate them for explicitly mentioned sins. Many diverse reasons have been suggested for these differences in evaluation. Most of these explanations point to the didactic aims which concern the author of a particular tradition.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to this approach, one would expect to find interpretations critical of Aaron and his actions in eras of opposition to the priesthood, paralleling great admiration for Aaron in the traditions belonging to periods in which priestly leadership enjoyed popularity and support. The fact that the biblical text does not cover up Aaron’s sins increases this expectation. A study of the traditions of the end of the second Temple period and the period of the Mishna and Talmud reveals a plethora of interpretations which deal with Aaron. However, only a few of them contain even the gentlest expression of critique. Even these rare instances of criticism only appear the local context of Aaron’s explicit sins; they do not deal with his leadership role as the patriarch of the high priesthood. The theory which attempts to explain the phenomenon as a function of the Sages’ caution in critiquing national heroes does not stand up to scrutiny. If one examines traditions which deal with other biblical heroes, such as Abraham, Moses and David one finds substantive criticism of their public leadership and personal conduct.[[14]](#footnote-14)

It would seem that the great disparity between the ideal of priesthood as presented in the biblical text and the reality in the period of the Sages at the end of the second Temple period did not allow for the use of Aaron’s image as the reflection of the High Priest in their time. The figures of Moses or King David could serve as a prototype of the leader,[[15]](#footnote-15) and the images of the Patriarchs and prophets could serve as models for the scholar;[[16]](#footnote-16) The popular support which these authorities enjoyed allowed the use of the positive images of biblical characters to inculcate lessons of leadership and ethics, both positive and negative. On the other hand, the great disparity between the positive image of Aaron in the biblical text and the increasing estrangement from the images of the priests, made Aaron irrelevant as a model for deriving lessons, both positive and negative.

What then is the alternative model for the development of Aaron’s image?

The extant rabbinic traditions dealing with Aaron’s image revolve around four central axes:

1. Ethical aspects of Aaron’s image
2. Hierarchy of leadership in the description of Aaron’s status
3. Fraternal relationship between Moses and Aaron
4. Aaron’s role in the sin of the Golden Calf

In the discussion below, we will examine the traditions concerning three of these four axes,[[17]](#footnote-17) and suggest an explanation for their authors choosing to develop Aaron’s image based on these parameters, while almost entirely ignoring his role in the area of the Temple rite.

1. The focus here is on the traditions of the aggadic midrashim, not on halakhic traditions attached to biblical verses dealing with sacrifices, or those focused on the laws of the Temple and sacrifices. With respect to the distinctions regarding priesthood in general, see J. Neusner, "The Mishnah's Conception of the Priesthood: the Aggadah versus the Halakhah", *Review of S Rabbinic Judaism* 14,1 (2011) pp. 92 – 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Those who hold that this thrust already began in the later biblical literature argue that the image of Aaron is presented in the Deuteronomic literature and in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in line with the challenges of the generation of the return to Zion. 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) pp. 95-105. Similarly: J.W. Watts, "Scripturalization and the Aaronide Dynasties, *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 13 (2013) pp.1 – 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See chapter 3 of the work, which is entirely devoted to praise of Simon b. Johanan the great. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See F. V. Reiterer, "Aaron's polyvalent role according to Ben Sira", *Rewriting Biblical History* (2011) pp.27-56, especially pp. 46-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Antiquities of the Jews* (ed. Shalit), Jerusalem 2002, 3:188: “[…] God appeared to Moses and commanded him to give the priesthood to his brother, Aaron, whose piety (and righteousness) earn for him, more than any (other person) the right to receive this honor.” In the continuation (3:190): “And now God Himself decided that Aaron was worthy of this honor, and chose him to serve as priest, for He knew that he is the most righteous amongst us […] (3:192): For (indeed) Aaron was the worthiest of all to receive this honor, by virtue of his family and (the spirit of) his prophecy, and due to his brother’s praiseworthy character.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As his words in the introduction to his autobiographical work, *חיי יוסף* [trans. D, Schwartz], Jerusalem 5768, p. 63: “My pedigree is not at all unexceptional, but rather descends from priest of ancient generations. Just as each nation has its own basis for belonging to the elite, for us membership in the priesthood is the sign of noble pedigree […]” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See L. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Aaron", *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg* (1996) pp.167-192. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Concerning the opposition of the members of the sect to the priests of Jerusalem, see R. A. Kugler, "Priesthood at Qumran", *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years II* (1999) pp.93 – 116; ibid, "The Priesthood at Qumran: the evidence of references to Levi and the Levites", *The Provo International Conference* (1999) pp.465 – 479. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See C. Hempel, "The Sons of Aaron in the Dead Sea Scrolls" *Flores Florentino* (2007) pp. 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) pp.135-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See I. Gruenwald, "From Priesthood to Messianism: the Antipriestly Polemic and the Messianic Factor", *Messiah and Christos* (1992), pp.75 – 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See further W. Horbury, "The Aaronic priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews", *Messianism among Jews and Christians* (2003) pp.227 – 254; D. W. Rooke, "Jesus as royal Priest: reflections on the interpretation of the Melchizedek tradition in Heb 7", *Biblica* 81,1 (2000) pp.81 – 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. E. Margulies, London, 5709. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For survey of the different approaches to the aims of the rabbinic midrashim, see: Y. Gafni, *ארץ ישראל בתקופת המשנה והתלמוד: חקר שנות דור – הישגים ותהיות*, Katedra 100 (5761), pp. 200-226. For a more specific survey of approaches to the aims of the interpretations dealing with biblical characters, see B. Elitzur, על *מגמות בדרשות אמוראי ארץ ישראל העוסקות באישי המקרא, דיסרטציה,* Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan (5766). An interesting summary of the various explanations given for the anomalies in the midrashic evaluations of biblical images may be found in A. Chwat, *הזכאים במקרא וחייבים בחז"ל*, *Talelei Orot* 12 (5766), pp. 13-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. E.g. in the case of Abraham: R. Abahu said in the name of R. Elazar: Why was our father Abraham punished, and his offspring subjugated in Egypt for 210 years? Because he conscripted Torah scholars. As it states: “He mustered his retainers, born into his household.” And Samuel said: Because he overreached regarding God’s attributes, as it states: “By means of what will I know that I will inherit it?” And R. Yochanan said: Because he prevented people from entering under the wings of the Divine Presence, as it states: “Give me the souls, and you take the property for yourself” (B. Talmud Nedarim 32 a). The accusation is particularly harsh in the case of Moses: Because Moses heard the Israelites speaking behind his back [Tanhuma [6] Pekudei 7: Because he heard the cynics of the generation speaking about him] as it states: “Whenever Moses went out to the Tent, etc., and gaze after Moses” (Exodus 33:8). And what would they say? R. Yitzchak said they were speaking his praise […] and R. Chama said it was derogatory. They said: See the neck, see the leg. He is eating at the expense of the Jews, he is drinking at the expense of the Jews, and all that he has is from the Jews (Tanhuma [2] Pekudei 4). And many other such examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Concerning the Sages use of the patriarchs of the nation as models for the leaders of their generation, see E.E. Urbach, "מלך ונביא בעיני חז"ל"*, טיפוסי מנהיגות בתקופת המקרא,* Jerusalem (5733) pp. 55-68; idem, "המלוכה המקראית בעיני חכמים"*, ספר יצחק אריה זליגמן* (5743) pp. 439-451; D. Goldblatt, *The Monarchic Principle: Studies in Jewish Self Government in Antiquity*, Tübingen 1993, pp. 176 – 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See M. Aberbach and L. Smolar, "Jeroboam and Solomon: Rabbinic Interpretations", *JQR*59 (1968) pp. 118 – 132; R. L. Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity*, London – New york 1999, pp/83 – 109; R.R Kimelman, "The Conflict Between R. Yohanan and Resh Laqish on the Supremacy of the Patriarchate”, *Proceedings of the 7th World Congress of Jewish Studies* 3 (1981) pp. 1 – 20; S. Safrai, "Tales of the Sages in the Palestinian Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud", *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971) pp. 209 – 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The elaboration on Aaron’s sin in the sin of the Golden Calf in the rabbinic traditions, and the transformation which took place in these traditions in evaluating his role in the sin, are beyond the scope of the present paper. The extensive treatment of Aaron’s role in the sin is not surprising, as it remains close to biblical text and is elaborated upon in order to derive educational and religious lessons from his sin, in line with the needs of the generations of the conveyors of the traditions. In this respect, this axis is different than the other three, where the elaboration on and development of Aaron’s image are not necessarily integrated with the depiction of his image and actions in the text. For further discussion of the topic of Aaron and the sin of the Golden Calf in rabbinic traditions, see: L. Smolar & M. Aberbach, "The Golden Calf Episode in Postbiblical Literature", *HUCA* 39 (1968) pp.91-116; N. M. Waldman, "Interpretive cover-ups: whitewashing the images of Aaron and the Israelite people in the incident of the Golden Calf", *Freedom and Responsibility* (1998) pp. 51-64; J. Watts, "Aaron and the Golden Calf in the rhetoric of the Pentateuch", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 130, 3 (2011) pp.417-430. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)