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Scribal Features That Helped the Priestly Text Survive

The biblical priestly text is unique in the ancient Near East, in that it utilizes scribal features such as colophons, cross references, and casuistic laws (when... then...), aimed at making the text accessible to the public. This preserved Israelite priestly writing past the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

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Priests, Scribes, and Priestly Scribes

Priests and scribes each played a central role in ancient Judaism. Priests were in charge of sacrifices and managing the purity of the Temple and Israelites in general. Scribes were experts in texts and interpretation. The qualifications for each job were distinct, as were their methods of training.

The training required to become an elite scribe serving in the royal chancellery or copying religious texts would have been rigorous, requiring both talent and exertion. Years of study would have been necessary to become expert in reading, writing, and the production of texts.[1] Young priests, in contrast, likely underwent some kind of informal family-based training, something like apprenticeship for a trade, before they began to undertake their duties, but would not have required schooling like a scribe.

The job of priest was severely limited by genealogy; only men from families that were believed to be descended from Aaron, the first high priest, could serve as priests themselves.[2] In contrast, anyone could be a scribe, at least theoretically. In practice, however, scribes needed to come from families with the financial resources to allow their sons—there is no evidence in ancient Israel for women as scribes—to take the time necessary to learn to be scribes. The early 2nd century B.C.E. sage, Joshua Ben Sira, pointed out:

Sir 38:24 A scribe’s wisdom is in the opportunity for leisure, and he who does less business, it is he who will become wise (NETS).[[3]](https://www.thetorah.com/article/scribal-features-that-helped-the-priestly-text-survive" \l "_ftn3)

Priestly families appear to have been well represented among those with the resources to provide such leisure for their sons. In fact, Ben Sira himself is generally believed to have been a priest by ancestry.

Ezra the Priest-Scribe

Perhaps the most famous priest-scribe of Jewish antiquity was Ezra, whose dual role is highlighted in the verses that introduce him:

עזרא ז:א וְאַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּמַלְכוּת אַרְתַּחְשַׁסְתְּא מֶלֶךְ פָּרָס עֶזְרָא בֶּן שְׂרָיָה בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה בֶּן חִלְקִיָּה.... ז:ה בֶּן אֲבִישׁוּעַ בֶּן פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הָרֹאשׁ. ז:ו הוּא עֶזְרָא עָלָה מִבָּבֶל וְהוּא סֹפֵר מָהִיר בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...

Ezra 7:1 After these events, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah son of Azariah son of Hilkiah… 7:5 son of Abishua son of Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron the chief priest—7:6 that Ezra came up from Babylon, a scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses which YHWH God of Israel had given…

Both aspects of Ezra’s position are emphasized: He is given a lengthy genealogy tracing his ancestry all the way back to Aaron, while his expertise as a scribe and interpreter of Torah is highlighted. The fact that many priests were also scribes helps to explain the scribal features of the priestly text in the Pentateuch.[4] Or perhaps the phenomenon, which is by no means unique to P, can be explained by the demands of composition of a large-scale work that combines several complex pre-existing units.

Colophons

One such feature is the use of titles or colophons at the beginning or end of some sections of the laws of the priestly source.

Sacrifices

Leviticus 6–7 marks the beginning of the discussion of each type of sacrifice it considers:

* *ʿOlah*

ויקרא ו:ב זֹאת תּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה

Lev 6:2 This is the *torah*of the burnt offering;

* *Minḥah*

ויקרא ו:יא וְזֹאת תּוֹרַת הַמִּנְחָה

Lev 6:11 And this is the *torah*of the grain offering;

* *Ḥaṭṭaʾt*

ויקרא ו:יח זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַחַטָּאת

Lev 6:18 This is the *torah* of the sin offering;

* *ʾAsham*

ויקרא ז:א וְזֹאת תּוֹרַת הָאָשָׁם

Lev 7:1 And this is the *torah*of the guilt offering;

* *Zebaḥ Shelamim*

ויקרא ז:יא וְזֹאת תּוֹרַת זֶבַח הַשְּׁלָמִים

Lev 7:11 And this is the *torah*of the sacrifice of well-being.

The entire section concludes:

ויקרא ז:לז זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה לָעֹלָה לַמִּנְחָה וְלַחַטָּאת וְלָאָשָׁם וְלַמִּלּוּאִים וּלְזֶבַח הַשְּׁלָמִים. ז:לח אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת מֹשֶׁה...

Lev 7:37 This is the *torah*for the burnt offering, the grain offering, and the sin offering, and the guilt offering, and the ordination offering, and the sacrifice of well-being, which the Lord commanded Moses…”[5]

Genital Emissions

In two different chapters, Leviticus deals with genital emissions, and each ends with a colophon:

* Postpartum emissions

ויקרא יב:ז זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַיֹּלֶדֶת לַזָּכָר אוֹ לַנְּקֵבָה

Lev 12:7 This is the *torah* concerning her who bears a child, male or female.

* Male and female emission (healthy and diseased)

ויקרא טו:לב זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַזָּב וַאֲשֶׁר תֵּצֵא מִמֶּנּוּ שִׁכְבַת זֶרַע לְטָמְאָה בָהּ. טו:לג וְהַדָּוָה בְּנִדָּתָהּ וְהַזָּב אֶת זוֹבוֹ לַזָּכָר וְלַנְּקֵבָה וּלְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב עִם טְמֵאָה.

Lev 15:32 This is the *torah* concerning him who has a discharge: concerning him who has an emission of semen and becomes unclean thereby, 15:33 and concerning her who is in menstrual infirmity, and concerning anyone, male or female, who has a discharge, and concerning a man who lies with an unclean woman.

Skin Afflictions

An especially rich source for such titles and colophons appears in the chapters on skin afflictions, and comparable afflictions of clothing and houses:

* Cloth afflictions

ויקרא יג:נט זֹאת תּוֹרַת נֶגַע צָרַעַת בֶּגֶד הַצֶּמֶר אוֹ הַפִּשְׁתִּים אוֹ הַשְּׁתִי אוֹ הָעֵרֶב אוֹ כָּל כְּלִי עוֹר לְטַהֲרוֹ אוֹ לְטַמְּאוֹ.

Lev 13:59 Such is the procedure for eruptive affections of cloth, woolen or linen, in warp or in woof, or of any article of leather, for pronouncing it clean or unclean.

* Purification of the recovered person (begins and ends with a colophon)

ויקרא יד:ב זֹאת תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת הַמְּצֹרָע בְּיוֹם טָהֳרָתוֹ

Lev 14:2 This is the *torah* for a *metzoraʿ* at the time that he is to be cleansed.

ויקרא יד:לב זֹאת תּוֹרַת אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ נֶגַע צָרָעַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא תַשִּׂיג יָדוֹ בְּטָהֳרָתוֹ

Lev 14:32 This is the *torah* for him who has a *tzaraʿat* affection and whose means for his cleansing are limited.

* General Summary

ויקרא יד:נד זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה לְכָל נֶגַע הַצָּרַעַת וְלַנָּתֶק. יד:נה וּלְצָרַעַת הַבֶּגֶד וְלַבָּיִת. יד:נו וְלַשְׂאֵת וְלַסַּפַּחַת וְלַבֶּהָרֶת. יד:נז לְהוֹרֹת בְּיוֹם הַטָּמֵא וּבְיוֹם הַטָּהֹר זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַצָּרָעַת.

Lev 14:54 This is the *torah* for every *tzaraʿat* affection—for scalls, 14:55 for *tzaraʿat* on a cloth or a house, 14:56 for swellings, for rashes, or for discolorations—14:57 to determine when they are unclean and when they are clean. This is the torah concerning *tzaraʿat*.[6]

Sotah and Nazirite

* The woman suspected of adultery (*sotah*)

במדבר ה:כט זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַקְּנָאֹת אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׂטֶה אִשָּׁה תַּחַת אִישָׁהּ וְנִטְמָאָה. ה:ל אוֹ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲבֹר עָלָיו רוּחַ קִנְאָה וְקִנֵּא אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהֶעֱמִיד אֶת הָאִשָּׁה לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה וְעָשָׂה לָהּ הַכֹּהֵן אֵת כָּל הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת.

Num 5:29 This is the *torah* in cases of jealousy, when a woman goes astray while married to her husband and defiles herself, 5:30 or when a fit of jealousy comes over a man and he is wrought up over his wife: the woman shall be made to stand before YHWH and the priest shall carry out all this ritual with her.

* Purification of the nazirite

במדבר ו:יג וְזֹאת תּוֹרַת הַנָּזִיר בְּיוֹם מְלֹאת יְמֵי נִזְרוֹ...

Num 6:13 This is the *torah* for the nazirite, on the day that his term as nazirite is completed…

* Summary of nazirite laws

במדבר ו:כא זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַנָּזִיר אֲשֶׁר יִדֹּר קָרְבָּנוֹ לַיהוָה עַל נִזְרוֹ מִלְּבַד אֲשֶׁר תַּשִּׂיג יָדוֹ כְּפִי נִדְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִדֹּר כֵּן יַעֲשֶׂה עַל תּוֹרַת נִזְרוֹ.

Num 6:21 Such is the obligation of a nazirite; except that he who vows an offering to YHWH of what he can afford, beyond his nazirite requirements, must do exactly according to the vow that he has made beyond his obligation as a nazirite.

Red Cow

* Introducing the red cow ritual (this is a variant form)

במדבר יט:ב זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְ־הוָה לֵאמֹר

Num 19:2 This is the statute of the*torah* that YHWH has commanded

* Death impurity in a tent

במדבר יט:יד זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם כִּי יָמוּת בְּאֹהֶל

Num 19:14 This is the *torah* when a person dies in a tent

While the terminology of these colophons is unique to the priestly source, similar scribal notes appear elsewhere in biblical literature, as Michael Fishbane shows; see, for example, the references to royal archives that recur throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles or the titles that structure Jeremiah’s visions against the nations and Ezekiel’s temple vision. “Such annotations and collections, found in legal and prophetic literature,” Fishbane writes, “only make sense as formal conventions of an established scribal tradition.”[7]

Cross References

Another scribal characteristic of the priestly laws, whose significance has recently been discussed by Naphtali Meshel, is cross-references. For example, according to Leviticus 1:11, a burnt offering is to be sacrificed on the north side of the altar:

ויקרא א:יא וְשָׁחַט אֹתוֹ עַל יֶרֶךְ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ צָפֹנָה לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה...

Lev 1:11 It shall be slaughtered before YHWH on the north side of the altar…

In subsequent passages that discuss the other sacrifices that must be slaughtered on the north side, instead of repeating this, they simply reference the rule for the burnt offering:

* Sin/purification offering of the prince

ויקרא ד:כט וְשָׁחַט אֶת הַחַטָּאת בִּמְקוֹם הָעֹלָה

Lev 4:29 And the sin offering shall be slaughtered at the place of the burnt offering.

* Sin/purification offering generally

ויקרא ו:יח[כה] בִּמְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר תִּשָּׁחֵט הָעֹלָה תִּשָּׁחֵט הַחַטָּאת

Lev 6:18[25 ] The sin offering shall be slaughtered at the spot where the burnt offering is slaughtered

* Guilt offering

ויקרא ז:ב בִּמְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁחֲטוּ אֶת הָעֹלָה יִשְׁחֲטוּ אֶת הָאָשָׁם

Lev 7:2 The guilt offering shall be slaughtered at the spot where the burnt offering is slaughtered.

The language in which the cross-reference is formulated differs from passage to passage.[8]

Casuistic Laws

A third scribal feature employed by the priestly source, as Guy Darshan has shown, is the casuistic formulation of some of its laws, i.e., “if/when…. then…” Laws formulated in casuistic terms are widespread in ancient Near Eastern *civil* law; they play a prominent part in the Laws of Hammurabi and the Covenant Collection of Exodus 21-23, for example.

The priestly sources employs casuistic law for a variety of topics, for example:

ויקרא א:ב אָדָם כִּי יַקְרִיב מִכֶּם קָרְבָּן לַי־הוָה מִן הַבְּהֵמָה מִן הַבָּקָר וּמִן הַצֹּאן תַּקְרִיבוּ אֶת קָרְבַּנְכֶם.

Lev 1:2 If any man among you offers a sacrifice to YHWH, you are to offer your sacrifice of cattle from the herd or from the flock.

ויקרא יב:ב אִשָּׁה כִּי תַזְרִיעַ וְיָלְדָה זָכָר וְטָמְאָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים...

Lev 12:2 If a woman gives birth and bears a male child, she shall be impure for seven days…

במדבר ה:יב אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי תִשְׂטֶה אִשְׁתּוֹ וּמָעֲלָה בוֹ מָעַל...ה:טו וְהֵבִיא הָאִישׁ אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל הַכֹּהֵן...

Num 5:12 If any man’s wife goes astray and acts unfaithfully to him… 5:15 the man shall bring his wife to the priest….

Apart from the biblical priestly source, casuistic laws do not appear in ancient Near Eastern ritual texts. Nevertheless, they are attested in Greek laws concerning purity and cult from the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., that is, roughly contemporary with the priestly source.

One important implication of the casuistic formulation is that it addresses laws to “the public at large,” in contrast to ancient Near Eastern ritual texts that are intended for priests alone.[9] For our purposes, it is noteworthy that authors of the priestly source took the practices of the scribes of the non-priestly legal corpus as a model for their own composition.

Priestly Scribes Writing for a Popular Audience

Elsewhere in the ancient Near East, priests wrote texts that, like the Pentateuchal priestly source, contained detailed descriptions of the rituals they performed. These texts, however, were for internal use only. Israel’s priests may also have had such texts, but Leviticus 1–16, as well as Numbers 5–6 and 18–19, is addressed not to priestly practitioners alone but to the entire people of Israel.[10]

We do not know what inspired priests to compose a public account of the rituals they supervised. Perhaps recognition of the growing prestige of texts, evident in the publication of Deuteronomy toward the end of the seventh century B.C.E., gave priests the desire to see their life’s work memorialized in writing. Or perhaps the priestly source draws on brief scripts composed after the establishment of the Second Temple to help in the performance of complex rituals that had been suspended during the exile. Whatever the inspiration, the decision to compose a public account of priestly responsibilities was a fateful one.[11]

In the short term, it opened up priests to criticism: anyone who could read the document, not a large number of people, to be sure, could complain if its rules were not being followed. Indeed, one advantage from the point of view of priests of keeping instructions out of the public eye is that it prevents such criticism. But in the long term, although its authors surely could not have anticipated this outcome, it gave the priestly document a permanence that it otherwise could not have enjoyed upon the destruction of the Temple and the abolishment of most of its rituals.

Scribes can be seen as the precursors of the rabbis, textual experts and exegetes, and thus on a continuum with rabbinic Jewish leaders of today. And while the expertise of priests has been irrelevant since the destruction of the Second Temple almost two millennia ago, the incorporation of the public account of priestly practice into the Torah guaranteed that the priestly heritage would live on even in the absence of a Temple, when the scribal/rabbinic tradition of Torah study became supreme.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/scribal-features-that-helped-the-priestly-text-survive)

1. On scribes in biblical and Second Temple times, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 25-43, 78-84, and Paul D. Mandel, *The Origins of*Midrash*: From Teaching to Text*(Leiden: Brill, 2017), 21-86.
2. The genealogical claim of an Aaronide priesthood, as put forth in the Priestly text of the Torah, conceals a more complicated history. Editor’s note: For some treatments of the question, see Mark Leuchter, [“How All Kohanim Became Sons of Aaron,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/how-all-kohanim-became-sons-of-aaron) *TheTorah* (2019); David Frankel, [“The Flowering Staff: Proof of Aaron's or the Levite's Election?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-flowering-staff-proof-of-aarons-or-the-levites-election)  *TheTorah* (2019); Ely Levine, [“The Historical Circumstances that Inspired the Korah Narrative,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-historical-circumstances-that-inspired-the-korah-narrative) *TheTorah* (2015); Adele Berlin, [“The Levite Rebellion Against the Priesthood: Why Were We Demoted?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-levite-rebellion-against-the-priesthood-why-were-we-demoted) *TheTorah* (2013).

Σοφία Σειράχ 38:24 σοφία γραμματέως ἐν εὐκαιρίᾳ σχολῆς καὶ ὁ ἐλασσούμενος πράξει αὐτοῦ σοφισθήσεται.

The Greek translation of the first stich differs somewhat from the Hebrew of this passage, which has been preserved in fragmentary form (MS B in the Beentjes edition):

חכמת סופר תרבה חכמה,

A scribe’s wisdom increases wisdom;

וחס[ר] עסק הוא יתח[כם].

And he who is lacking in business, it is he who will become wise.

The view of the Greek translation likely reflects the view of Ben Sira himself, since it is expressed in the second stich of the Hebrew, though without the word “leisure.” Nevertheless, some might argue that it’s more accurate to refer to it as the view of the grandson, who translated his grandfather’s work into Greek, in the second half of the second century B.C.E.

1. P is not the only place in the Torah or Tanakh that scribal elements are to be found, of course. Deuteronomy certainly embraces scribal rhetoric, but no one is surprised by scribal features in D—indeed, its authorship is sometimes attributed to scribes. The point I am making is that, contrary to what many scholars claim, priests and scribes, or the priestly and the scribal, are not opposing categories.
2. For our purposes we can leave aside the complicated question of what the ordination offering is doing in this list. Editor’s note: For a discussion of this problem and the relationship of these laws to other sections in the Torah, see Zev Farber, [“This is the *Torah* for the Priests Performing the Offerings,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/this-is-the-torah-for-the-priests-performing-the-offerings) *TheTorah* (2017).
3. See Fishbane’s interesting comments on the development of this colophon, *Biblical Interpretation*, 28.
4. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 27; Fishbane supplies references to the texts mention (for Jeremiah and Ezekiel, see n. 20).
5. While the priestly source engages in cross-referencing in both its laws of sacrifice and its laws of purity, the cross-references are more prominent in the laws of sacrifice. Naphtali Meshel, “Hermeneutics and the Logic of Ritual,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*7 (2018): 466–482 [474–475]. Meshel argues that, as a consequence of this, the rabbis explicitly limit the application of hermeneutical principles to a single deduction for sacrificial laws, whereas for other areas of law, including purity, a deduction can supply the basis for a second deduction. See, for example, the difference between how the laws of baldness and impurity are dealt with in b. Zebahim 49a–50b in contrast to how the laws of sacrifices are dealt with in the same source. Meshel concludes: “The logical patterns underlying the ritual systems left some faint but unmistakable marks on the contours of the hermeneutical tools used to study them” (p. 482).
6. Guy Darshan, “The Casuistic Priestly Law in Ancient Mediterranean Context: The History of the Genre and Its *Sitz im Leben*,” *HTR*111 (2018):24-40 [quotation, 31; Greeks, 32-38].
7. Editor’s note: For discussion, see Jeffrey Tigay, [“Why Are Laws for Priests Included in the Torah?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-are-laws-for-priests-included-in-the-torah) *TheTorah* (2018).
8. For different views about the composition of P, James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture*(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus*(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).