

THE OTHER SIDE OF ISRAELITE PRIESTHOOD:
A SOCIOLOGICAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

My paper treats a less-discussed aspect of the ancient Israelite priesthood: the fact that the sons of Aaron, or rather, the biblical grandsons of Aaron and their offspring, in both the literal and figurative sense, were both officiants in the sacrificial cult and zealots for God. Thus we may speak of two Aaronic genealogies and, in parallel, of two Aaronic legacies—the priestly and the zealous. Furthermore, I will contend that these two legacies are fundamentally linked and partially overlapping. Indeed, in a way we may speak in terms of one genealogy, or, one legacy, which is priestly/zealous—a combined social-cultural motif that is not without its inner tensions.

The question at the root of the present volume—was 70 CE really a watershed?—is indirectly answered by the very method of my study, which goes back to the legendary Israelite crossing of the Jordan at the time of the symbolically charged passage from the desert to the land of Canaan (Numbers 25). From this primeval beginning my study extends to the survey of other paradigmatic scenes in ancient, medieval, and modern times; it concludes with some observations on relevant typical offshoots in our own generation. Nevertheless, it is clear that my study is a-historical. First, its center of gravity is present-day phenomena. Second, it is essentially analytic and conceptual, or rather theoretical. Third, many of the data processed in this study comprise a mixture of collective memory and sacred materials wherein there is no earlier or later but, rather, an absolute presentness, which is acutely sensed, and wherein there is much that is not scientifically proven, but nevertheless, persuasive and genuine from the point of view of the ardent believers—mythological truth or canonical fact.

I am a sociologist-anthropologist who studies high-energy true believers,¹ charismatic strong religion,² Jewish and other super-religiosity,³ and political religion (rather than religious politics).⁴ My academic interest centers on the points where religion or religiosity meets social movements, cultism, direct action, extremism, and violence. This phenomenon of religious radicalism, particularly when it resorts to coercive or subversive aggression, has been manifested in variegated ways in the past and is still quite conspicuous and effective today. Its dramatic actualization in the last four decades has been labeled “fundamentalism,” both in public discourse and academic discussion.⁵

“Fundamentalism”—basically the ultra-politicization of a holy scripture—has replaced several other terms, the most popular of which was “fanaticism.” However, while “fanaticism” is no longer in vogue, it is of some heuristic value. True, use of the term is often criticized because it bears a negative connotation. However, although the word has become derogatory it is nonetheless worthwhile to subject it at least to a cursory examination, especially from an etymological point of view. In its Latin origin “fanaticism” is related to *fanum*, “a place solemnly consecrated to a god—a temple (with land around it).” The reference is to the deity spirit that typically filled classical shrines and inspired the local priestly cadres to behave enthusiastically, that is, to fulfill their sacred duties in a zealous manner. Apparently, then, the association of priesthood with a zealous type of worship is not uniquely Jewish.

However, rather than both “fundamentalism” and “fanaticism” I prefer the term “zealotry” for describing and analyzing the phenomenon of violent religiosity, particularly Jewish religious violence. For one thing, zealotry is both *etic* and *emic*:

¹ E. Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York, 1951).

² S. Appleby, G. Almond, and E. Sivan, *Strong Religion* (Chicago, 2003).

³ G. Aran, “Religiosity and Super-Religiosity: Rethinking Jewish Ultra-Orthodoxy” (forthcoming).

⁴ G. Aran, “Jewish-Zionist Fundamentalism,” in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, (ed. M. Marty and S. Appleby; Chicago, 1991).

⁵ The most scholarly ambitious and influential example is the Fundamentalism Project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which culminated in five volumes published by the University of Chicago, from *Fundamentalisms Observed* (1991) to *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (1996).

that is, the term is used by observers—academic and laymen—and at the same time by the “natives” and “practitioners” themselves.⁶ It is universal and local as well, and it can be used by outsiders in a derogatory sense but also by insiders, voluntarily and proudly, as a self-designation. Since “zealotry” can be charged with both negative and positive valuation, we may treat it neutrally.

Another reason for preferring the term zealotry is its mythico-historical depth. Zealotry is a key concept in a long and ample tradition still alive, an integral and intriguing component of a great religious and national culture. A major thrust of my work has been the attempt to unearth the deep strata of the concept of zealotry by rereading various Jewish sacred texts (the Bible and its traditional interpreters, *Aggadah* and *Midrash*, etc.) from the point of view of the social sciences. This paper is part of an undertaking to deconstruct the religious and social-political complex of which zealotry is a core element.

In my extensive field research I have discovered that present-day zealots relate themselves to past zealots, or rather to priests *cum* zealots. The latter serve as source of legitimization and guidance for the former. The priest-zealots of old have heirs today who look up at them as objects of identification and models for emulation. Thus, for example, I am acquainted with a certain group of radical North American Protestants involved in anti-black and anti-Jewish aggression. The name it uses is: “The Order of the Phineas Priesthood.”⁷ I am also acquainted with an order-like group of Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories⁸ involved in anti-Palestinian and anti-leftist aggression; it has adopted the pseudo-patronymic “Son of Phineas.”⁹ Conventionally, such borrowing or adoption of the names of great historical or mythological figures expresses not only sympathy and solidarity with them but also a presumption to have a sanction to act “in their name,” in accordance with the way

⁶ J. Cresswell, *Qualitative Enquiry and Research Design* (London, 1998).

⁷ R. K. Hoskins, *Vigilantes of Christendom: The History of the Phineas Priesthood* (Lynchburg, Va., 1997).

⁸ Particularly in Hebron.

⁹ That is, an adherent named “Jack Roth” would call himself “Jack, son of Phineas, Roth.”

they are thought to have behaved, and to monopolize the spirit that motivated them.¹⁰

In my comparative social study of religious violence, I thus found that present-day zealots relate themselves to a very old and ramified legacy featuring ancient legendary zealots, especially the great biblical father of all zealots—Phineas. The latter has been the source of inspiration or, rather, of obligation, and the role model for Jewish zealots—and to a lesser degree for Christian zealots—from earliest times. In order to better understand the zealots of our epoch and place I have reexamined the biblical subculture (counterculture?), at the epicenter of which the idea of zealotry is located.

First, I compiled a list of the prominent archetypical mythico-historical zealots. The list holds no surprise—it is indeed a classical roster of figures regarded by both adherents and students of Judaism as zealots par excellence. At the head of the list is, of course, Phineas, followed by Elijah¹¹ and a few other biblical figures: Levy son of Jacob, the Levites, maybe Ezra as well.¹² Then come Mattathias and the Hasmoneans, the Sons of Zadok from Qumran, the Zealots of the First Revolt against the Romans, and the Bar Kokhba rebels. All the above and some others as well are closely linked to one another. They are “family relatives” in several ways.¹³

The enumerated cases, conceived of as paradigmatic, are the basis of my attempt to construct an “ideal type” of zealotry. An ideal type—or pure type—is a (hypothetical) analytical model which is similar to known and typical empirical cases though not necessarily fully identical with any of them. The Weberian concept of *Idealtyp* is not meant to refer to moral ideals, perfect things, or a statistical average, but to an amalgamation of particular characteristics common to most (classical) cases of a given phenomenon. To quote Weber, it is formed by a onesided accentuation of

¹⁰ Cf. I. J. Yuval, “*Moses redivivus*—Maimonides as a ‘Helper to the King’ Messiah,” *Zion* 72 (2006/7):161–88 (in Hebrew).

¹¹ According to a well known Jewish tradition Phineas and Elijah were one and the same person; see L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1968), 6:316–17 n. 3.

¹² One may add the first prophet, Moses, as well.

¹³ Cf. the Wittgensteinian idea of family resemblance: L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (2d ed.; Oxford, 1963), 32 (§67).

one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete concrete individual phenomena that are usually present although occasionally absent. The ideal type is an effective tool in comparative social study. Each empirical case may be analyzed in light of the ideal, that is, in terms of the characteristics of the model that it possesses and that it lacks.¹⁴

My study of Jewish zealotry, using ideal-type methodology, has produced some interesting findings which I have discussed elsewhere.¹⁵ In the present forum I would like to raise just one issue concerning zealotry: its intriguing association with priesthood. My main argument here concerns a certain homology and close affinity between zealots and priests, particularly high priests—a point which may be suggestive when, in the context of this conference, we consider what disappeared with the destruction of the Second Temple and the consequent apparent cessation of the central, Temple-oriented, function of the priesthood.

At first glance, zealotry and Jewish priesthood appear opposite, representing, for example, the excessively discussed dissonance of charisma vs. routine, or of deviance vs. conformity. Nevertheless, despite the obvious contrast and tension between zealotry and priesthood there is an especially telling resemblance and kinship between these two types of religious virtuosity. In fact, the above association is so powerful that one may justifiably speak in terms of the “zealot-priest complex.”

In my several years of research devoted to religious extremism, I have tried to further the understanding of zealotry by examining its linkage to priesthood. Here, however, I would focus on the parallel and opposite enterprise, namely, on enriching our understanding of priesthood by examining its linkage to zealotry. For the particular purpose of this volume I tentatively shift my concern, accordingly, from zealots to priests, or rather from the priestly dimension of zealots to the zealous dimension of priests.

¹⁴ M. Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (trans. and ed. E. Shils and H. A. Finch; New York, 1997); S. J. Hekman, *Weber, the Ideal Type, and Contemporary Social Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1983).

¹⁵ G. Aran, *Jewish Zealotry: Past and Present* (forthcoming).

Before elaborating on the relationship between zealots and priests, however, I must briefly present one hypothesis to be substantiated by later argumentation. The Pentateuch says: “And he (Phineas) and his progeny after him shall have it, the covenant of everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God.”¹⁶ Therefore it is commonly held that an act of zealotry is the basis for the claim to monopoly on the priestly privileges. The zealous act, we may add, is also—although perhaps not unavoidable—the ultimate culmination and consummation of the priestly career and mission. In other words, perfect manifestation of priesthood in its pure and consistent form betrays the fundamentals of zealotry.

Zealot and Priest: Affinities

In the following I shall briefly survey some aspects of the affinity between the two phenomena, or two models, embodied in the paradigmatic figures of the zealot and the priest:

a.) The genealogical dimension and the professional-class dimension

According to the sacred texts, all ancient mythico-historical zealots who serve as paradigms for present-day zealots were—with no exceptions—priests (or Levites), as well.¹⁷ They were priests both by heredity and by career, that is, they were born priests and they worked in the priesthood—and it was the priesthood that engendered their lifestyle, socioeconomic status, political interest, etc. Elitism is just one derivative of these characteristics.

b.) The legendary and functional dimension

The unique initiative that made these figures worthy of praise and heavenly

¹⁶ Num 25:13. Various observers contend that the Phineas episode was inserted into the sacred narrative by the Aaronites in order to solidify their claim to the hereditary high priesthood. Similarly, there is speculation concerning the Hasmoneans’ manipulation of the priority of Jehoiarib in the list of the priestly families; see R. R. Hutton, “Jehoiarib,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. Freedman; New York, 1992), 3:666.

¹⁷ See the list at nn. 11–12, of the prominent archetypal Israelite cases of zealotry.

rewards, namely, the bold deed for which they were granted eternal priesthood, in short, their very act of zealotry, could be seen as sacrificial, thus as typically priestly. This act is an actual killing, subject to many detailed restrictions which amount to cultic rules. It is symbolic bloodshed for the purpose of purification and expiation, a dramatic murder aiming to mediate between the community and the divine, an assassination with theurgic effect conducted on stage in front of the public.¹⁸ But the above characteristics also define the act of *qorban*, sacrifice—which is the privileged specialization of the priesthood.

Turning now from the priestly nature of zealotry to the zealous nature of priesthood, let us note the obvious: The essence of Jewish priesthood is the Temple cult and the epitome of that is the sacrificial act—which is certainly an act of (religious) violence.

c.) The ideological dimension: the zealot-priest ethic

Both zealots and priests are patriots. In modern terminology, their fundamental “political” orientation is nationalistic and hawkish. Note not only the freedom-fighter-priest-cum-zealot Hasmoneans, but also the priestly core of the anti-Roman rebels,¹⁹ and—moving back to biblical models—the chauvinist enterprise of Phineas (vs. the Moabites—Numbers 25) and Levi (vs. the Shechemites—Genesis 34).

d.) The physical and personality dimension: the zealot-priest *habitus*

It is reasonable to assume that both zealots and priests have tough stomachs and hard heads. From various aggadic sources there emerge the contours of the mentality and the body of the priests—and they remind us of those that characterize zealots. Both are activists and practical; hot-blooded and aggressive; crude; moralist; strict; exacting; masculine; daredevil. Correspondingly, both are physically strong and

¹⁸ R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, 1989); M. Bourdillon and M. Fortes, ed., *Sacrifice* (London, 1980).

¹⁹ D. Goodblatt, “Suicide in the Sanctuary: Traditions on Priestly Martyrdom,” *JJS* 46 (1995): 10–29; idem, “Priestly Ideologies of the Judean Resistance,” *JSQ* 3 (1996): 225–49.

quick; manually skillful; alert and incisive; sensual. Note the mention of the priests running up the ramp to the altar (*t. Kippurim*1:12) and the portrait of them, in the *Letter of Aristeas* (§§92–93), as competitive athletes.²⁰ The description of the priestly routine in the Temple as “synaesthetic,” utilizing all the senses (seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling), applies to the zealot, too.²¹

e.) Worldview: the zealot-priest conception of reality

More specifically, I refer here to the priestly and zealous perspective on the sacred. Schwartz defines the priests’ legal interpretation of the sacred as naturalist or realist (as opposed to the rabbinic nominalist interpretation).²² I would rather characterize their attitude as essentialist and immanentist.²³ Thus it is also categorical, static, and dichotomous. Such orientation applies to zealots, too. Both zealot and priest resemble the Authoritarian Personality, (often associated with a closed mind, rigidity, obsessiveness, and to a certain degree also fascist inclinations).²⁴

The last three common characteristics (*c*, *d*, *e*) can be subsumed, if anachronistically and generally, under the description of both priests and zealots as proto-Zionists of sorts.²⁵

f.) The symbolic dimension: the thematic of the zealous and priestly imagination

²⁰ “The service of the priest is in every respect unsurpassed in the physical strength (required of them). . . . With both hands they take up the legs of the calf, each of which for the most part are more than two talents’ weight, and in a wonderful manner throw them with each hand to the correct height (for the altar) and do not miss in their aim” (C. T. R. Hayward, *The Jewish Temple: A Non-Biblical Sourcebook* [London, 1996], 28–29). For an intriguing analysis of this portrait of the priesthood see: A. Glücklich, *The Road to Qumran* (Tel-Aviv, 2006), 57–58 (in Hebrew).

²¹ See Glücklich, *The Road to Qumran*.

²² D. R. Schwartz, “Law and Truth: On Qumran-Sadducean and Rabbinic Views of Law,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research* (ed. D. Dimant and U. Rappaport; Leiden and Jerusalem, 1992), 229–40.

²³ Ascribing ultimate reality to the essence that inheres in a thing; regarding it as having innate existence or universal validity rather than as being socially or intellectually constructed; assuming that the really real nature of things is contained within their innermost rather than beyond them; denying reality that transcends the empirically perceived.

²⁴ T. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950).

²⁵ Cf. D. R. Schwartz, “Does Religious Zionism Tend to Sadduceism?” *Eretz Acheret* 24 (November, 2005): 72–76 (in Hebrew).

Zealots and priests stand in the center of a triangle, the three corners of which are: Blood—Purity (and Danger)—Passion (libido). This motif will be developed later.

Zealot and Priest: Apparent Discrepancies

Notwithstanding my emphasis here on the affinity of zealotry and Jewish priesthood, the fundamental distinctions, if not contradictions, between them, should not be ignored. It is, however, precisely the oppositions between the two that make their similarities revealing.

Conventionally, zealots and priests are seen as different and contrary in at least three senses:

First, Israelite priesthood is founded on the hereditary principle.²⁶ In sociological terms it is based on ascription whereas zealotry depends on achievement.²⁷ Unlike priesthood, zealotry is not automatic and guaranteed in advance. While priesthood is particularistic, zealotry is universalistic. In principle, zealotry is potentially open to anybody; it is democratic, so to speak. Priesthood, in contrast, is aristocratic by definition.

Second, the priest is obsessed with procedures. The priestly act is patterned according to ample and detailed prescriptions. Any deviation from the minute priestly norm borders on sin and might prove harmful. Zealotry, in contrast, is spontaneous and even creative in a way. The zealous act bypasses prevalent binding procedures, thus challenging their hegemony.

Third, priesthood is highly conformist and fully institutionalized; actually it comprises the establishment. In contrast, zealotry betrays primeval surge. It is completely uninstitutionalized and antiestablishment by implication, a type of anarchism.

²⁶ M. Himmelfarb, *Kingdom of Priests: Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism* (Philadelphia, 2006).

²⁷ T. Parsons, *Societies* (New York, 1961).

The above three points partially overlap. Their commonality boils down to the classic opposition between tradition, routine and authority on the hand, and charisma on the other. Yet, does priesthood have no charismatic qualities? And is there no zealot tradition and zealot authority? I would like to add a few comments on zealots and priests that somewhat mitigate the opposition between the two types, qualify the differences between them, and refine our understanding of each of them

We can come at the hereditary versus merit or excellence issue from both sides. On the one hand, despite its hereditary privileges, priesthood, too, is conditioned by and related to the need to meet high moral and cultic standards. As mentioned earlier, the priestly position was awarded to virtuous brave individuals who excelled in religiosity, such as Phineas and Mattathias. Similarly, it is known that even well-established priests who violate the rules of the game risk their status. If they are economically or politically corrupt, or ritually defiled, they might be ousted.²⁸

On the other hand (and perhaps more controversially), there inheres a quasi-hereditary core in zealotry that makes it resemble priesthood. To begin with, zealotry is not just an individual quality but also a collective one. Actually, in some cases it is a family or tribal trait. Note the Levites, whose murderous inclination comes by birth and kinship affiliation.²⁹ True, zealotry appears to be an impulsive reaction. However, impulses are contingent on chromosomal heritage.

It is true that the substance of the zealot's act is but of a moment—sudden, sharp and brief. Zealotry is not normal, neither a gradual or continuous state nor a predictable development or outcome of conscious intention and systematic effort. In fact, any premeditation, training or preparation for the zealot's act may invalidate and preempt it in advance.³⁰ Nevertheless, it must be underlined that the zealot's passionate surge is not capricious, accidental, or random. It is a behavioral corollary

²⁸ See, for example, the biblical case of the high priest Abiathar (1 Kgs 2:26–27; see also *b. Yoma* 73b), and later stories about the priests Menashe (Josephus, *Ant.* 11.302–312) and Alcimus (2 Macc 14:3).

²⁹ See the massacre in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf, Exodus 32.

³⁰ *b. Sanh.* 82a (“If someone comes to consult [about doing an act of zealotry] he is not to be instructed [to do it]”).

of an innermost unique quality. It is the acting-out of some unknown inherent nature. Fundamentally zealotry is a potentiality. One identifies a zealot only in retrospect. Even the zealot himself is not aware of his true value until the critical moment. Zealotry is an innate and predestined attribute. It is, in other words, like a genetic flaw that is effective and discovered only in maturity.

Another issue concerns the zealot's act as a rite. While zealotry seems to be primordial and rowdy, it is in fact subject to harsh discipline that defines and conditions it. For example: Phineas' zealous act, viewed as the act of an ideal type, would have been invalidated had it not been committed in the "real time" of the sexual act (not even a single second after the act),³¹ or, if not carried out in public, that is, in the presence of at least ten persons.³² Practically zealotry is strait-jacketed—so much so that it becomes hardly possible. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that traditional Judaism made zealotry such a demanding and complicated cultic operation in order to minimize, or rather to nullify, the probability of it actually happening. According to that tradition, the zealot's act, very much like the sacrificial priestly act, cannot be committed under just any conditions. Its specific time and place are essential requisites for this rite, just as for any other sacrament. The hallowed celebration of the zealous act must be performed in a very particular way—and if not committed accordingly, it is judged as a severely punishable act of murder pure and simple.

Now we turn to the institutional status of zealotry. First, while the zealot appears to undermine traditional law, in his own understanding and that of his many admirers he actually conforms to the true spirit of the law, right in tune with the original intention of the divine lawgiver. Some believe that if his act is indeed truly a zealous one, it is synchronized with the heavenly rhythm. A present-day zealot I know, who is also a Bible scholar, claims that the essence of Phineas-like zealotry is

³¹ Ibid. ("Had Zimri separated himself [from the Midianite woman] before Phineas killed him, he would have been executed for killing him").

³² See, for example, the commentary of R. Obadiah Bertinoro (15th/16th century) to *m. Sanh.* 9:6, printed in standard editions of the Mishnah.

timing. The zealot's test is to act exactly when God wills it; not a second before or after. Furthermore, while the zealot undoubtedly challenges the religious and political authorities, and therefore might be thought to be antithetical to the authoritative priesthood, it must be recognized that, at the same time, he actually volunteers to serve those authorities by performing an indispensable and costly task they cannot (afford to) carry out by themselves. Zealotry is an urgent high-risk mission that absolves impotent authorities (Moses and the Elders in the Moabite Desert, for instance) from fulfilling their responsibility. The zealot's act implies subversion. The authorities, however, neutralize the subversive danger by coopting zealotry.

Hybridity

Despite the linkage and resemblance between zealot and priest, their association is problematic. Conceiving the two as one entity—zealot-priest, or, priest-zealot—is suggestive, however. Once we speak of one entity, the contradiction between the two types is transformed into an inner contradiction within a so-called social “hybrid.”³³ The tension contained within the priest-zealot figure makes this figure a culturally potent and fascinating one. The zealot-priest is at one and the same time a legalist and traditionalist, yet a charismatic one.³⁴ He is stringent but impulsive, and so forth.

At this point I would like to suggest a somewhat daring hypothesis, possibly a heuristic metaphor. Let us envision *priesthood as zealotry in a golden cage*. By this I mean to suggest that we consider Israelite priesthood, centered on the sacrificial rite, to be an ingenious way of pre-empting the likely damages of zealotry while channeling its violent energies toward controllable and desirable ends. Zealotry is adapted, contained and tamed by introducing it into the Temple, the heart of the establishment, and thus becoming the axis of the Jerusalemite cult.

³³ This concept is mainly used with regard to identity hybrids, such as transgender and transnational. See, for example, *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations* (ed. K. E. I. Smith and P. Leavy; Leiden, 2008).

³⁴ Cf. the Weberian typology of the three variants of authority: traditional, legal, and charismatic; H. H. Gerth, and C. Wright Mills eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London, 1948).

As mentioned earlier, the world common to both zealots and priests is marked by the trinity of blood, libido, and purity. First, the two religious virtuosi—zealot and priest—are what the Bible would call “people of blood” (2 Sam 16:7–8; Ps 26:9; 55:23; 59:2; 139:19; Prov 29:10); both can be lethal. Two comments are in order here. 1) The violent act of both priest and zealot is termed slaughter (*sheh□itah*).³⁵ Their blood-spilling activity conforms to a complex system of ritual norms. 2) Both roles allow for forms of killing exempt from criminal jurisdiction, and, more generally, not subject to legalities.³⁶

As for libido: In the case of the paradigmatic zealous act, sexuality is quite self-evident. Witness the way Phineas reacts to harlotry: striking at a copulating couple; aiming at their genitals; simulating a sexual act. Similarly, the Shechem story (Genesis 34), which ends with Levi perpetrating a massacre, opens with an intercourse (rape?) and continues on to a story of mass circumcision (castration?).

In the case of priests, sexuality is more subtle. At times, however, it is quite blatant, as in the biblical treatment of the *sotah* (Numbers 5)—the woman suspected of adultery.³⁷ Here, the priest conducts a sexual ritual par excellence.³⁸ In addition, priests regulate the community’s and their own sexuality. They also supervise the ritual cleansing of menstrual and other impurities that affect sexual organs and activity (Leviticus 15), and apply special marital restrictions to their own class (Leviticus 21). As we have learned from Freud, Foucault, and others, such aggressive puritanism is another form of coping with sexuality.

The third issue to consider is purity. While purity is the priest’s middle name,

³⁵ Thus, for example, the Greek verb used in 1 Macc 2:24 to describe the assassination of the man upon the altar by Mattathias—who is said to have been zealous, and compared in v. 26 to Phineas—is the same as that used for the ritual act of slaughter. See N. Martola, *Capture and Liberation: A Study in the Composition of the First Book of Maccabees* (Åbo, 1984), 218.

³⁶ Note that the talmudic discussion of the case of a priest who serves while impure rules that he should not be tried in court by his fellow priests. Rather, “the young priests crush his skull with an axe” (*m. Sanh.* 9:6).

³⁷ On this biblical law and its development in the Mishnah (*Sotah*) and other rabbinic literature, see L. Grushcow, *Writing the Wayward Wife: Rabbinic Interpretations of Sotah* (Leiden, 2006).

³⁸ The priest tears the woman’s clothes as low as her bosom, unties the tresses of her hair, fastens her torn clothes with a girdle below her breasts, etc.

it preoccupies the zealot as well. Analytically we should distinguish between ritual (bodily and sexual) purity and racial (ethnic-national) purity. Phineas, like Levy and Mattathias, fought the type of assimilation created by bodily-sexual impurity that engenders tribal impurity. Their zealous acts are acts of national purification, aimed at dissociating the Israelites from the fornicating Moabite women, the lustful Shechemite men eager to join the club, and the Hellenized Jews who do not circumcise their sons.

Concluding Remarks: Policing Borders

Blood, passion and purity bring us to the issue of boundaries—the boundaries of the individual body on the one hand, and those of the collectivity, on the other. The relationship between the two types of boundaries is now a matter of common knowledge in the social sciences owing to the work of Mary Douglas.³⁹ One of her more striking anthropological insights refers to a situation in which the collectivity's boundaries are violated and consequently the group's identity is threatened. In such a situation there emerges a special sensitivity in the group ethos regarding keeping body boundaries intact and under control.⁴⁰ This thesis is helpful in explaining why the biblical narrative in Numbers 25 (the Phineas story), set in the plains of Moab before the people cross the Jordan on the way into the Land, focuses so much attention on the regulation of physical contact between Israelites and Gentiles. The same holds for the situation during the Return to Zion in the days of Ezra (see esp. Ezra 9–10!) and during the early Hasmonean period (see esp. 1 Macc 1:11–15).

A salient expression of the priestly preoccupation with body boundaries is the relatively large space devoted by the Torah to the subject of bodily flow (*ziva*—gonorrhoea, as well as menstrual blood, semen, and the like; Leviticus 15). Concerning zealotry, we have repeatedly mentioned its focus on instances of the transgression of

³⁹ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1988).

⁴⁰ See, for example, J. Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge, 1983).

the boundaries between the Israelite and the Other. The zealot's initiative aims at securing the tribal boundaries so as to avoid assimilation.

The zealot and the priest—two variations upon religious virtuosity—may thus be seen as being in charge of the protection of Israel's borders. Metaphorically speaking, they serve in the “sacred” Border Police of mythico-historical Israel. In this context, it is relevant to note another lesson that classical anthropology teaches us, namely, that those responsible for guaranteeing the integrity of collective identity are themselves often especially sensitive to the question of borders. This sensitivity derives from their own marginal social position, between and betwixt, neither here nor there.⁴¹ In other words, those entrusted with the holy task of guarding the group's frontiers occupy a problematic social status. Located in the proximity of the border they are liminal and hybrid. Naturally enough, their own identity is confused and full of tension.⁴²

It is not coincidental, for example, that the contemporary Border Police of the State of Israel—charged with the task of keeping Jews and Palestinians apart—includes a large representation of Druze, Ethiopians and “Russians” (immigrants from the former Soviet Union)—three elements whose Israeliness is somehow questionable and incomplete. Excelling in policing the borders facilitates their integration in the center of society. All of the above, I would suggest, is true with regard to the priests and zealots who policed the borders of ancient Israel. Zealots, first of all, are liminal and hybrid: praised and canonized but kept at arm's length; heroes but deviants; enjoying high rewards but risking a fatal penalty; a priori suspect and circumscribed, yet idolized in retrospect. A zealot is an acrobat walking a tight rope.

And priests? They are organically linked to the people of Israel but at the same time a distinct caste relegated to its own elevated enclave. Even marital ties between them and the rest of the people are not a trivial matter (see Lev 21:7; Ezek 44:22; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.276–277). Moreover, priests are positioned in the middle, neither in

⁴¹ V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, 1991).

⁴² Cf. Y. Bilu, *Without Bounds* (Jerusalem, 1993 [in Hebrew]).

heaven nor on earth, representing the divine vis à vis the community and the community vis à vis the divine. Indeed, priests (and Levites), being liminal, are the only ones who do not own land (Deut 18:1–2). Another aspect of the priests' hybrid nature: They shed blood but are the champions of seeking peace.⁴³

Thus, the two types of Israelite boundary specialists are subject to limitations and obligations. Nevertheless they are privileged. They are exempt from certain normative demands enforced upon other Jews, including norms regarded as elementary and natural—specifically, norms that concern murder.

The privileges of priesthood are well known. The priests enjoy offerings and emoluments that provide them with a comfortable living. Another basic social norm is qualified when applied to priests: in particular instances they are licensed to kill a person outside of court's jurisdiction.⁴⁴ But that, of course, reminds us of zealots.

The other side of legitimizing some strictly defined and rare forms of murder is the perilous venture the boundary guardians take upon themselves. Boundary policing is in any event risky—and, indeed, zealots and priests also undertake “professional risks”—the hazard of those living on the brink, who experience liminality and challenge the limits.

The two virtuosi embark upon a journey loaded with action. In the zealot's act there inheres an element of provocation, a certain life-or-death gamble. Zealots who are intent on killing (slaughter) know well enough that they too might be killed if they fail to conform to the detailed specifications of their mission. So, too, however, there were severe professional risks that threatened the mission of the priest, especially the high priest. The source of danger is the unmediated proximity of the sacred. This is another species of liminality which is known to be lethal. Note especially, in this regard, the dangerous situation of the high priest on the Day of Atonement.⁴⁵ We

⁴³ Cf. *m. Avot* 1:12: “Be of the disciples of Aaron—a lover of peace and seeker of peace.”

⁴⁴ See above, n. 36.

⁴⁵ Cf. *m. Yoma* 5:2. “The entrance of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement was not only a great privilege, offering the rare opportunity of catching a glimpse of the Deity, but was also fraught with great danger (of immediate death, etc.)” (J. Z. Lauterbach, *Rabbinic Essays* [New York, 1973], 72–75).

know the intricate preparations and security measures taken prior to his deep bold intrusion into the realm of liminality—the Holy of Holies. There was no certainty of his surviving it. Thus, both the zealous and the priestly acts harbor a murderous potentiality and also a suicidal potentiality. Both contain not only aggression but at the same time also victimhood. Both priest and zealot initiate violence and may be its victims as well.

In conclusion one may speculate that both priests and zealots seek—even if only subconsciously—to die for God. In a sense, the priest-zealot is a (potential) martyr, reminding us, *inter alia*, of the juxtaposition of martyrdom and rebellion in the Jewish resistance to Rome in the days of Bar Kokhva.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Compare also the willingness to die for God celebrated in 4 Maccabees and in the stories of the Ten Martyrs (G. Reeg, ed., *Die Geschichte von den zehn Märtyren* [Tübingen, 1985]). Although the latter were composed later than the Second Rebellion, the fact that they became linked to that rebellion is not accidental.