

Descendents of Aaron or Zadok: Politics and Pluralism in Ancient Israel Parshat Emor

Leviticus 19:1 – 20:27/ Ezekiel 44:15 -31



Ezekiel was a prophet who lived in Babylonia along with the exiled Jewish community around the time of the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. Of priestly descent, he dreamed about the rebuilding of the Temple and the reestablishment of the priestly rites in Jerusalem. In his prophecies, he describes the rebuilt Temple and paints a picture for the people of Israel what life will be like when they return to their own land. These descriptions gave the people a sense of hope that return and renewal was a real possibility. Ezekiel encouraged the people by teaching them that repentance and return could bring a renewal of the covenant with God.

The Book of Ezekiel, however, is extremely problematic. Many of its descriptions of the Temple and its rites appear to contradict statements in the Torah. For instance, the Torah speaks of the priests as the sons of Aaron; Ezekiel calls them the descendents of Zadok. Even his description of the temple precincts and the special offerings is not the same. While some sages believed that Ezekiel was describing the new Temple as it would exist in messianic times, others were disturbed enough to call for the censorship and exclusion of this book from the Bible. It was only through the heroic efforts of one Hananiah ben Hezekiah that the book was included in the scriptures. This TTT is a little more abstruse than most, given the nature of this Haftorah. Sometimes, however, we learn lessons not only from what the text says but from the history of the text. Here we will explore the origins of Israel's ancient priesthood and what it can teach us about Jewish life today.

Ezekiel 44:15 – 16

Now the Levitical priests descended from Zadok, who maintained the service of my sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from Me – they shall approach Me to minister to Me; they shall stand before me to offer Me fat and blood – declares the Lord God. They alone shall enter My sanctuary and they alone shall approach My table to minister to Me; and they shall keep my charge

Leviticus 21:1

The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them...

Michael Fishbane: Etz Hayim Commentary on the Haftorot

Zadok: This is the ancestral line of priests in Jerusalem. Zadok served as the bearer of the ark for David, along with Abiathar (2 Samuel 15:24-29, 35, 17:15) Zadok supported Solomon for dynastic session (I Kings 1:8, 32) whereas Abiathar backed Adonijah. Therefore it was Zadok who anointed Solomon king....It was the old Jerusalem priesthood that Ezekiel designates for his new Temple program, According to Biblical genealogies priests of the second temple were of the Zadokite up to the Hasmonean rebellion. The Hasmonean priests were not Zadokites. (Note: The Hasmoneans were the family of Judah Maccabee. During the rebellion against the Syrian Hellenists in 165 BCE they not only took over the priesthood but the monarchy as well.)

Encyclopedia Judaica, See Zadok

The fortunes of the House of Zadok after the Exile are reflected in the position given to them in the books of Ezekiel and Chronicles. In Ezekiel 40–48, the exiled Zadokites expect as reward for their faithfulness that they alone shall perform the priestly functions in the new temple; the rest of the Levites are to be reduced to the status of servants. The Book of Chronicles shows that after the return this program was not put into practice....In the Second Temple period, the House of Zadok retained the high priesthood continuously until the Hasmonean revolt.... in the early years of Simeon, Jonathan's successor, was the high priesthood irrevocably transferred from the Zadokites to the Hasmoneans. This seems to have given the appropriate occasion for the crystallization of the Dead Sea Sect. The sect probably originated with a group of priests deeply disturbed by prevalent trends, especially in the high priesthood. The Hasmoneans were considered usurpers and the sect maintained the exclusive right of the Zadokites to fill the high priestly office.

Sadducee - A definition found on-line (www.absoluteastronomy.com)

The sect of the Sadducees (or Zadokites and other variants) - which may have originated as a Political Party - was founded in the 2nd century BC and ceased to exist sometime after the 1st century AD. Their rivals, the Pharisees, are said to have originated in the same time period, but have survived as the later forms of Rabbinic Judaism. Their name in Hebrew was *tsedduqim*, a name they chose to indicate that they were followers of the teachings of the High Priest Zadok, who anointed Solomon king during the First Temple era. While little or none of their own writings have been preserved till today, they seem to have indeed been a priestly group, associated with the leadership of the Temple in Jerusalem. Some say that they were not truly descendants of the High Priest Zadok, but rather the followers of another Zadok who rebelled against his Rabbinical Teacher. Most of what we know about the Sadducees comes from Josephus, who wrote that they were a quarrelsome group whose followers were wealthy and powerful, and that he considered them boorish in social interactions. We know something of them from discussions in the Talmud, the core work of rabbinic Judaism, which is based on the teachings of Pharisaic Judaism. However, historians find the Talmud's historical statements on many issues to be suspect.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 13a

R. Judah said in the name of Rav: Truly, there is a man whose name should be remembered for blessing. He is Hananiah ben Hezekiah. But for him, the book of Ezekiel would have been suppressed, for its words contradicted the Torah. What did he do? He had three hundred kegs of oil taken up to him and sat in an upper chamber until he so expounded them [that the contradictions were reconciled].

Questions for Discussion

1. Why would the rabbis include a book in the Bible which appears to blatantly contradict the teachings of the Torah? What does this say about diversity and pluralism in the Jewish tradition? What was it about the book of Ezekiel that so fascinated them?
2. How did the sages deal with these contradictions? Did they view the inconsistencies between Ezekiel and Leviticus as contradictions?
3. What political and religious considerations might have led to the difference of opinion about the right to the priesthood? Why do you think Ezekiel chose to emphasize the Zadokite priesthood over the Aaron's priesthood lineage? Why do you think Ezekiel was so concerned with the connection to the house of David?
4. Why do you think the Hasmonean house and the Maccabees chose to change the focus away from the house of Zadok to that of Aaron?
5. When we come across seeming contradictions between one biblical text and another, how should we deal with them? Do such contradictions throw the legitimacy and the authenticity of the text into question? Is it possible to embrace both points of view even when they seem to contradict one another?
6. What connection might there be between the Sadducees, the descendants of Zadok and the Biblical period? How might the biblical roots of this controversy help us understand the existence of various groups in later rabbinic times?
7. Today's Torah and Haftarah Portion both deal with matters connected with the priesthood. What meaning can we find in this institution today? What does the Torah mean when it says that people of Israel will be a nation of priests and a holy people? How can we become a nation of priests today?

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