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THE ANOINTING OF AARON: THE PROCESS BY WHICH HE BECAME HOLIER THAN HIS SONS

MICHAEL BIGGERSTAFF

“Then take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head, and anoint him.”
(Exod 29:7)¹

“And he [Moses] poured some of the anointing oil upon Aaron’s head, and
anointed him in order to make him holy.” (Lev 8:12)

In the ancient Near East, priests were the religious functionaries, the ones who communed with the gods. They were part of a highly specialized caste, one not open to just anybody. Although Israel was unique and distinguished from the other nations (see Exod 19:5–6; 20:3–5),² they too had a priesthood. Israel’s priesthood was founded by the Lord: “Bring near to you Aaron, your brother, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, that he may be a priest for me” (Exod 28:1). Exodus 29:1 begins the specific procedures the Lord delineated to Moses concerning the inauguration of the priesthood: “And this is the thing which you will do to them in order to make them holy, to be priests for me.” Leviticus 8 is depicted as providing the fulfillment of these prescriptions.³ Not only is the initiation as a whole intended to hallow Aaron and his sons before the Lord, but every step of the initiation sanctified them a little more, thereby elevating them above the rest of the congregation of Israel.⁴

1. All scriptures are translated from Hebrew by the author unless otherwise stated.

2. The commandments the Lord placed upon Israel caused them to be unique among the nations, particularly the first and second commandments (Exod 20:3–5). Another unique distinguisher is that the Lord, YHWH, seems to be a deity unique to the kingdom of Israel. See also James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 241–42.

3. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 545–49 and Baruch A. Levine, “The Descriptive Tabernacle Texts of the Pentateuch,” *JAOS* 85.3 (1965), 311, for a summary concerning the dependence of Leviticus 8 on Exodus 29.

4. For anointing as a symbol of an elevation in status, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 553.

Priests functioned as intermediaries between the human and the divine.⁵ One of their chief responsibilities was to protect Israel from sin and impurity. In Moses' final blessing to the tribe of Levi, he identified three main ways priests were to accomplish this. He blessed them that "they shall teach your judgments to Jacob, and your law (תּוֹרָה) to Israel; they shall place incense before you, and whole burnt offerings upon your altar" (Deut 33:10).⁶ In other words, first, the priests taught the law of the Lord, or the Mosaic law, which included both religious purity laws and secular civil laws—there was no separation between church and state. Second, they offered incense unto the Lord. Third, they performed sacrifices on behalf of the people. Leviticus 1–7 depicts five basic types of sacrifice, three of which explicitly mention an expiation factor. Additionally, Richard Hess mentions the duty priests had in "distinguishing between what is clean and unclean" (see Lev 10:10).⁷ In order to act in these responsibilities, priests needed to be pure and holy—the very thing the consecration ceremony ensured.

Consecration of priests was a seven-day ritual. Although it is unclear what parts of the prescribed ritual were performed each day,⁸ the fact they occurred at all is telling. The ordination consisted of eleven subrituals dividable into four main groups: washing, robing, anointing, and sacrificing. In addition to initiating Aaron and his sons into the priesthood, the injunction "to make them holy" pervades each individual ritual of the ceremony (Exod 29:1). Aaron and his sons were first washed to ensure ritual purity. After their purification they were clothed with the vestments that would forever mark their office; Aaron received the elaborate high priestly robes, whereas his sons received the plain white linen of the priests. Next Aaron, but not his sons, was anointed "to make him holy" (Lev 8:12). Then a series of sacrifices were performed on behalf of all the initiates, including a sin offering for the purpose of expiation. Another of the sacrifices was a ram of consecration. During the ritual of this sacrifice, some of its blood was mingled with anointing oil and sprinkled upon Aaron and his sons, effectively anointing them, with the result that "he shall be made holy, and his vestments, and his sons, and his sons' vestments with him" (Exod 29:21). Finally, Exodus 29:33 states that, "They shall eat the food which made the atonement, to ordain them and to make them holy." Thus the ordination ceremony ordained and sanctified⁹ Aaron and his sons into the priesthood.

A casual reading of the texts of Exodus and Leviticus, as the brief

5. Patrick Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 163–65.

6. See also, Miller, *Ancient Israel*, 165–71; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 52–3; Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (New York: JPS, 1989), xxxiv.

7. Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 193. See also Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 290.

8. See William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40 AB 2A* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 468–69 and Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 536–40, for a short summary of the complications.

9. In Hebrew, the verb קָדַשׁ means "to be holy, to make holy, to consecrate, and to dedicate."

summary above provides, may leave a reader with the idea that Aaron and his sons were equally purified and set apart. However, that is not the case. A closer examination of these texts demonstrates that Aaron received different garments and was anointed twice (his sons only once). While the robes of the high priest are distinctive, sacred, and symbolic, they did not determine the high priest; the anointing did that.¹⁰ To this effect, both the prescription and fulfillment depict Aaron as being anointed, מִשַּׁח, and sprinkled, נָזַח, with oil that bore the scent and holiness of the Lord, whereas his sons were only sprinkled, נָזַח. Additionally, Aaron (not his sons) was anointed at a time that equated his holiness with that of the Tabernacle and its objects—most holy. Finally, the manner in which Aaron was anointed, מִשַּׁח, was the capstone to his being elevated above his sons in holiness. Whereas other texts, including some of the prescriptions, depict Aaron's sons as also being anointed (see Exod 28:41; 30:30; 40:15; Lev 7:35–36; Num 3:3), the anointing unique to Aaron further set him apart—both spiritually and authoritatively—from his sons as demonstrated by the special properties of the anointing oil itself, the location and time of his anointment, as well as the method with which he was anointed.

The Anointing Oil

Role of Scent

The olfactory sense orients individuals in life.¹¹ Just as the aroma of cooking food indicates an upcoming meal, other scents herald their associated contexts. These harbingers thus permit individuals to orient themselves in life.¹² As such, one can mentally prepare the pallet for dinner or even ascertain if a child is ill. While these two brief examples demonstrate an obvious benefit of the olfactory sense to a modern individual, the value of the sense of smell to an ancient Israelite was far greater.¹³ In addition to the modern beneficence of smell, ancient Israel affixed a rich religious context. The law of Moses consisted of strict purity laws by which one could easily become defiled. Many of these contagious impurities emanated a foreboding scent, signaling the befouled area. In this way, the role of scent was twofold: first, it aided an Israelite in avoiding a situation in which they could become impure; second, the scent identified the nature of the area. In detail, both those points are distinct. However, in reality, they are one in the same as the nature of an area either defiles or it does not. Bad smells were indicative of impure areas, being associated with disease and death (see Exod 7:18, 21; 8:10; 16:20, 24; Isa 3:24;

10. See Levine, *Leviticus*, 48.

11. See C. Houtman, "On the Function of the Holy Incense (Exodus XXX 34–8) and the Sacred Anointing Oil (Exodus XXX 22–33)," *VT* 42, no. 4 (1992): 458. I am greatly indebted to this article in providing a catalyst of thoughts and inspiration that fueled my current understanding on the role of scent to ancient Israelite society.

12. Houtman, "Holy Incense," 458.

13. Houtman, "Holy Incense," 458. Also note that on at least two occasions, the God of Israel was contrasted against the pagan gods because He could smell (see Deut 4:28 and Ps 115:6).

34:3; Joel 2:20; Amos 4:10; Ps 38:6; Eccl 10:1).¹⁴ On the other hand, pleasant aromas were associated with health and life, thus indicating places of neutral or positive purity (see Hos 14:7; Song 4:10–11; 5:5, 13).¹⁵ In short, scent was the first indicator as to whether one was heading into a ritually unclean locale, and a warning to those about to enter a place too holy for them—one in which they would become the defiling presence, such as the tabernacle.

Scent not only designated the nature of specific areas but also of individual people (see Gen 27:27).¹⁶ A unique aspect of life is that everyone has their own personal odor composed of the chemical make-up of their body as well as the lifestyle they live. Individuals have little control over their chemical composition, but they are more or less dominant over their lifestyle. The more willingly and passionately an individual works, the more embedded they become in their work, and their work in them. On the other hand, the more distanced and grudgingly an individual works, the less embedded they are in their work, and the less likely their work becomes a part of them. Each occupation has a unique scent to it; a tanner smells considerably different than a potter, both of whom have a different aroma than a farmer. Furthermore, lifestyle and work is a daily occurrence. Through repetition of actions and habits a person becomes what they do. Thus a person who farms the land becomes a farmer and someone who builds becomes an architect. Additionally, some individuals may have worked multiple part-time jobs or engaged in other personal interests. Whatever the case may have been, the things individuals do and know relate to who they are; farmers do not know as much about architecture as an architect does, and vice versa. Bringing this together, an individual has his own body odor, which is then augmented by his lifestyle, hobbies, and occupation.¹⁷ It is in this way that each person has his own unique, personalized identifying scent. This scent identifies the personality of the individual as well as their occupation and status (see e.g. Jer 48:11; Hos 14:7; Ps 45:9; Song 7:9; Esther 2:12).¹⁸

One of the best biblical examples of this is the story of Jacob and Esau. “Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a peaceful man, dwelling in tents” (Gen 25:27). Each of these occupations—so to speak—bore a unique scent as the rest of the story attests. As Isaac neared his deathbed he desired to bless Esau, his firstborn (Gen 27:2–4). However, Rebekah plotted with Jacob to steal the blessing from Esau (Gen 27:6–13). In the course of the deception, Rebekah and Jacob took several measures, not the least of which

14. See Houtman, “Holy Incense,” 458–59.

15. See Houtman, “Holy Incense,” 459.

16. See also Houtman, “Holy Incense,” 459.

17. Individuals are often born into a certain socio-economic status that sets certain bounds beyond which they cannot progress. Furthermore, children often carry on the work of their parents. How often an individual was able to obtain an apprenticeship outside of the family business (so-to-speak) is unknown. Thus, how much of their lifestyle an individual was able to choose is debatable, to a point. Even if forced into labor, one has the choice of how hard and willingly they will work.

18. See Houtman, “Holy Incense,” 459.

was Jacob's donning of Esau's clothing and having the skin of goats somehow attached to his hands and neck (Gen 27:15–16). When Jacob brings Isaac savory meat, Genesis says that Isaac "did not recognize him [Jacob] because his hands were hairy, like the hands of his brother Esau; so he blessed him" (Gen 27:23 [17–23]). However, the blessing did not actually take place until Jacob came near his father and Isaac subsequently "smelled the odor of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, 'See! The smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed'" (Gen 27:27). Over time, the clothing of Esau had begun to smell like its owner. If Jacob had not worn it, he would not have smelled like Esau—like a man of the field—and Isaac would not have continued with the blessing.

The Lord's Scent

Some individuals, for the right price, would obtain perfumes and oils and subsequently rub, or anoint, them into their skin, thus masking their scent and granting a new one (see 2 Sam 12:20; 14:2; Amos 6:6; Mic 6:15; Ruth 3:3). While many rich Israelites enjoyed this luxury, so did the priests. However, the priests were the only Israelites permitted to use the "holy anointing oil" on penalty of exile by the Lord (see Exod 30:32–33). This oil bears the Lord's scent. In order to be so designated, there was a strict, divinely mandated recipe to be followed. "Take unto yourself choice spices: 500 shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much [250 shekels] aromatic cinnamon, 250 shekels sweet cane, and 500 shekels cassia—all according to the sanctuary shekel—and a hin of oil olive" (Exod 30:23–24). That is, 1500 shekel weight of solid aromatic to 1 hin of liquid. Milgrom suggests "the proportions work out to about 1 pint olive oil to 54 pounds of dry spices,"¹⁹ while Durham claims the solid aromatics total 33½ lbs.²⁰ Which of the two is correct is not as important, or relevant, as the realization that the amount of solid matter to liquid is astounding. Durham notes how the process of production suggested by Lucas below provides a plausible explanation for how the high ratio of solid to liquid can produce a nonviscous ointment.²¹ Lucas "describes the Egyptian process of pressing gum resins with oil, then removing the oil by squeezing the resultant paste in a cloth to extract the oil. The oil thus became the base, one that absorbed and then retained the fragrance of . . . aromatic substances."²² The oil would then be kept while the solid mass is disposed of. Though Lucas is describing an Egyptian method, it is likely that the early Israelites would have used a similar process. This procedure would ensure the oil would be especially fragrant.

19. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 498.

20. John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 407.

21. Durham, *Exodus*, 407.

22. Durham, *Exodus*, 407. Durham goes on to express the likelihood of this method because of Exodus' mention of "a spice-mixer's mortar" in Exodus 30:25: "You are to blend these into a sacred Oil of Anointment, compounded in a spice-mixer's mortar, as a spice-mixer's blend. This is to be the sacred Oil of Anointment" (Durham's translation; Durham, *Exodus*, 405).

Since each ingredient itself is highly aromatic, the combination would produce a powerful, potent, and unique liquid fragrance.

Such a pungent and sacred smell would attract the rich and poor alike. As such, the Lord unequivocally forbade the duplication or use of this oil for any purpose outside that which was explicitly stated by Him. “It shall not be rubbed in an ordinary anointing upon the flesh of man, and you shall not make anything similar to its composition; it is holy and it shall be holy to you. Whoever makes an ointment similar to it, or puts any of it on an unqualified person, shall be cut off from his people” (Exod 30:32–33). Thus the Lord jealously claims and protects this recipe. Any who are anointed with this sacred anointing oil are anointed with the scent of the Lord. This scent, in light of the previously discussed role and worldview of scent, would, to some degree, transmit a level of the status and personality of the Lord to whoever, or whatever, was being anointed.²³ Since the Lord is holy (see Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8; and many more), those anointed with his scent will be made holy, as Leviticus 8:12 explicitly states takes place when Aaron is anointed: “And he [Moses] poured some of the anointing oil upon Aaron’s head, and anointed him in order to *make him holy*” (emphasis added). The Lord is also a deliverer, as evidenced by the Exodus (Exod 3–14). Thus, whoever, and whatever, is anointed will similarly function as a deliverer for the people since the priests performed, through their sacrificial responsibilities, an “atoning role [which was] essential for both forgiveness (Lev 4–5) and purification (Lev 12–15).”²⁴

Since the holy anointing oil represented the scent, personality, and status of the Lord, every drop upon an individual’s skin brought that individual closer to the Lord. Thus the greater the amount of the Lord’s scent one was anointed with, the greater the connection with the Lord. This connection merits greater holiness and a greater delivering role. Aaron’s sons had some of the holy anointing oil sprinkled upon them (Exod 29:21 and Lev 8:30).²⁵ Thus they were partakers of a degree of the Lord’s holiness placing them on a holier sphere than the unanointed congregation of Israel. Having been anointed to a degree, they also partook of the Lord’s status as deliverer by presiding over sacrifices (see Lev 1–7). However, these sons of Aaron were anointed through a sprinkling of a mixture of blood and holy anointing oil upon them. Aaron was also anointed this same way, but in addition, he also had an unspecified amount of the oil poured upon his head (see Ps 133:2). Whatever this amount—it was at least twice as much as his sons—he was thereby further

23. Houtman, “Holy Incense,” 464–65 phrases it this way: “Anointing oil of the prescribed composition is reserved by YHWH for use in his cult . . . By claiming the exclusive right to the composition of the sacred anointing oil, YHWH reserves its special fragrance for himself. By anointing ‘his’ fragrance is transmitted . . . So they are marked by his personality.”

24. James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 143.

25. Elsewhere the Bible refers to Aaron’s sons as being anointed (see Exod 28:41; 30:30; 40:15; Lev 7:35–36; 10:7; Num 3:3). Therefore this sprinkling can be seen as a form of anointing.

set apart and placed in a holier sphere than even his sons. Likewise, Aaron participates in the delivering role of the Lord to a greater extent than his sons, as can be seen by his preeminence during the Day of Atonement (Lev 16).²⁶ In short, though Aaron's sons were anointed with the holy anointing oil, and thus with a portion of the personality and status of the Lord, Aaron was anointed with a greater amount of the oil, and thus with a greater portion of the personality and status of the Lord. Therefore the nature of the anointing oil alone depicts Aaron as being set apart beyond that of his sons.

Location and Timing of the Anointing

Tabernacle

In addition to the special properties of the anointing oil, the order and location of Aaron's anointment in comparison to his sons was an even more unmistakable sign of demarcation. As already mentioned, an impure area had the power to contaminate any who entered, thus making them ritually unclean (see Lev 14:46).²⁷ While some forms of impurity could be cured with the passing of the day (see Lev 11; 14:46; 15:5–28; 17:15), many required a priest's declaration as well as the offering of a sacrifice (see Lev 12; 13–14; 15:28–30). This was the function of the priests. But before the Lord commanded Moses to "take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office" (Exod 28:1), there were no priests authorized to purify the people.²⁸ The Lord inaugurated his priesthood after he provided for a pure and holy place in which to do it; a place set apart from the impurities of the world, a place where the Lord's holiness could be free to purify individuals as they obeyed His set laws of purification.²⁹ Until that time, there was no such place in the camp of

26. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 54–55, in which he mentions that the Day of Atonement is part of the high priest's duty because he is responsible for all of Israel; also Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 183–84.

27. Houtman, "Holy Incense," 460–61 discusses how impurity can be spread through breath. Thus as the unclean breath disseminates in the area around the source, it pollutes the air thereby creating a ritually unclean area. It is distinctly possible that one of the purposes of the holy anointing oil and holy incense is to combat this unclean air. As sin spreads abroad in the camp of Israel, the air becomes contaminated, threatening the Tabernacle, which in turn threatens the presence of the Lord. The Lord's scent associated with the holy incense and holy anointing oil would then be seen as combating the unclean air.

28. The author is aware that the biblical text indicates that the ritual purity laws were established simultaneously with the construction of the Tabernacle and the inauguration of the priesthood. However, the author is also aware that much of the law of Moses appears to have been a codification of traditional laws. As such, many of the laws pertaining to ritual purity were likely already practiced prior to Moses' codification of them. Thus the law of Moses, whether or not it introduced new laws, provided the Lord's approved way to be cleansed from ritual impurity.

29. See Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 183–84; here Hess identifies three concentric circles of holy space, of which the Tabernacle is the center and holiest, the place where "God's presence was made manifest in a special way and the divine life resided in all its power."

Israel.³⁰ Thus the Lord instructed Moses, “Make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them” (Exod 25:8). The Lord did not want just any structure. He had a specific design in mind as indicated by the fact that he showed Moses the pattern—תַּבְּנִי־ת—after which the tabernacle was to be built (Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8; Num 8:4). It is not known whether the pattern was a vision of the completed structure, a comparable structure the tabernacle was to be built in the manner of, or if it was just the blueprint detailed in Exodus.³¹ What is known is that the text explicitly states that the tabernacle was commanded and designed by the Lord.

The tabernacle was designed to be a portable temple.³² A temple, in the most literal and basic sense, is best defined by the biblical Hebrew phrase used to describe it: the house of the Lord (or God).³³ This connection between the tabernacle and the temple is exemplified by one of the Hebrew words for tabernacle, מִשְׁכָּן, which means “dwelling” or “dwelling place.”³⁴ After all, the Lord expressed to Moses: “have them make me a sanctuary;³⁵ that I may dwell among them” (Exod 25:8, emphasis added; see also Exod 29:45–46). Besides being a dwelling place of the Lord, the tabernacle was to serve several functions. It was to be a place of revelation where the Lord could commune with Moses (Exod 25:22; 29:42). Another name of the Tabernacle was the “tent of meeting,” אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, because the Lord said on one occasion, “there I will meet with you [Moses]” (Exod 25:22) and on another occasion, “I will meet the Israelites there” (Exod 29:43). The Book of Leviticus further identifies the tabernacle as the location of sacrifice, and thus atonement (Lev 1–7). Each of these functions of the tabernacle had one purpose in mind: to

30. Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 129 claims that the purpose of the establishment of this religious institution was to not only worship the Lord, but to provide a way to atone for human sins. He continued by stating that it was “to this end the tabernacle was erected, so that God’s presence could become a permanent and living reality in Israel’s religious life. The tabernacle was furnished with the ark and altars, and all the other equipment necessary for making atonement.”

31. See Victor Hurowitz, “The Priestly Account of Building the Tabernacle,” *JAOS* 105.1 (1985), 21–30, esp. 22.

32. Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 203–5 and Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 288 provide a brief overview of Near Eastern antecedents of the tabernacle as well as briefly identifying the similarities between the tabernacle and temple. See also Levine, *Leviticus*, xxxvii where he says “the desert tabernacle described in the priestly tradition is modeled after actual temples” and later on page 48 where he links the tabernacle and Temple of Jerusalem.

33. The Hebrew has several ways of spelling “House of the Lord/God.” These are בֵּית יְהוָה (House of the Lord), בֵּית אֱלֹהִים (House of God/gods), בֵּית אֱל (House of God), and בֵּית אֱלֹהִים (House of God; Aramaic), and בֵּית אֱלֹהֵינוּ (House of our God).

34. Other names for the tabernacle are אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד (tent of meeting) and מִקְדָּשׁ (sanctuary). William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely, *Solomon’s Temple: Myth and History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 18 states: “The Lord identified the primary purpose of the tabernacle as follows: ‘let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them’ (Exod. 25:8); for this reason it is called the ‘dwelling place’ (*mishkan*), ‘the house of Yahweh (or the Lord)’ (*bet Yahweh*), and the ‘sanctuary’ (*miqdash*).” See also Levine’s discussion on pages 4, 48 of Levine, *Leviticus*.

35. The Hebrew word for sanctuary is מִקְדָּשׁ from the root קדש. Thus the Tabernacle, by definition is not only the dwelling place of the Lord, but is also holy.

draw Israel to their Lord. For this purpose, the Lord is said to dwell in the tabernacle. Thus dwelling, he is able to speak to Moses as needed, commune with the Israelites when they draw near to worship, and pardon sins and purify impurities when they sacrifice. The presence of the Lord not only blesses and purges the Israelites, but also designates the tabernacle as holy.³⁶

Ritual Space

The holy area of the tabernacle was a ritual space. (In other words, it was a space in which the rituals of the Lord were performed.) The most obvious rituals were those of sacrifice and atonement, but incense rituals were also performed (for sacrifice, see Lev 1–7; 16; for incense, see Exod 30:7; 40:27; Lev 10:1; 16:12–13; Num 4:6; 16[16–17:15]; Deut 33:10). These rituals extended beyond purifying the Israelites to the appeasement of the Lord in order that his presence might remain at the tabernacle (since the Lord is holy and cannot abide the slightest impurity).³⁷ As Miller phrases it, “holiness in one area required holiness for whatever impinged upon that area, and the holiness of one thing worked to protect and safeguard the holiness of another.”³⁸ The tabernacle was the center of the camp of Israel,³⁹ and thus it impinged on the camp and the camp on it. Milgrom argues that the tabernacle is defiled when any within the camp of Israel sin, thus he proposes a concept of collective responsibility for sin (see Lev 15:31).⁴⁰ For this purpose, daily and yearly purification sacrifices were offered in order to maintain the Lord’s presence (for *תְּבִיטָה* see Exod 29:38–42; for yearly, see Lev 16).⁴¹ The Lord did not himself perform any of these rituals; priests did. These priests were required to maintain high levels of ritual purity, as evidenced in Leviticus 21.⁴² Their level of holiness directly impacted the Lord’s presence because if they were impure, they would be unable to maintain the sanctity of the tabernacle.⁴³ If a priest was either ritually unclean or performed some other breach against the holiness code and was simultaneously officiating in the office of priest, one of two things would take place to ensure the Lord’s holiness would not be in jeopardy—or to ensure the Lord would not be mocked, depending upon how

36. See Miller, *Ancient Israel*, 137, 142. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 291 states that “God’s holiness rubs off . . . on whatever is close to Him or belongs to Him. . . . It thus seems that God’s holiness is not only His salient characteristic, but one that radiates out and sticks in various degrees to everything that is His or is near Him.” See also previous note.

37. Levine, *Leviticus*, 48 states: “As the presence of God was welcomed at the Tabernacle, extreme care had to be exercised to protect it from impurity.”

38. Miller, *Ancient Israel*, 143.

39. While the Bible seems to convey differing traditions on the actual location of the tabernacle in relation to the camp (see Exod 33:7 and Num 2), there can be little doubt that the tabernacle functioned as the religious center.

40. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 49–50, 258–61; Jacob Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary: The Priestly ‘Picture of Dorian Gray,’” *RB* 83 (1976): 390–99.

41. See also Levine, *Leviticus*, xxxiv.

42. Levine, *Leviticus*, xxxiv.

43. Levine, *Leviticus*, xxxiv states, “The priesthood was charged with maintaining the purity of the Sanctuary.”

one chooses to understand the text. Either the offending priest(s) would be instantly killed, such as the case with Nadab and Abihu (see Lev 10),⁴⁴ or the presence of the Lord would withdraw until proper purification was performed (see Ezek 10–11). This is the nature of the ritual space. It is holy because the Lord is holy and present.⁴⁵

By representing the Lord's presence, the tabernacle was the center of Israelite religious life. As previously mentioned, the priesthood was inaugurated only after the tabernacle was established. The necessity of a proper holy space in order to consecrate priests underlies the sanctity of the priest's office. As already discussed, the priests were anointed with the holy anointing oil, which represented the scent of the Lord. Being thus anointed, the priests were a type of representation of the Lord. The Lord is holy; therefore the priests are holy. The Lord cannot dwell in an impure and unholy sanctuary; therefore the priests also needed a pure and holy sanctuary in which to dwell.

Like the priests, the tabernacle needed to be anointed (see Exod 30:26–29; 40:9–11; Lev 8:10–11). It is the Lord's earthly dwelling, his house. Most importantly, it is his. As such, it needed to be so designated. The role of scent in identifying personality and status has already been discussed at length. Anointing the tabernacle and everything within it with the Lord's scent would thus confer his status and personality amounting “to a formal declaration that these implements were all in the category of ‘most holy,’ and thus that anyone or anything coming into physical contact with them would become infectiously holy.”⁴⁶ Thus the implements of the tabernacle were elevated in status above that of the mundane world to that of the Lord.⁴⁷ Equally important, the anointing prepared the accoutrements to partake of the personality of the Lord. The Lord is holy; thus they became holy. The Lord is a deliverer; thus they became deliverers. From thenceforth, the implements of the Tabernacle were to participate in rituals that were designed to deliver the Israelites from sin and impurity.

Anointing

Aaron's anointment in relation to the anointing of the accoutrements of the Tabernacle is significant. Leviticus 8 provides the order.⁴⁸ Moses began

44. See also the case of Uzzah being struck dead by the Lord because he touched the ark without the permission of the Lord; he was a holy priest, but the ark was a most holy object—having been anointed and ordained to such a status (2 Sam 6:6–7).

45. See Miller, *Ancient Israel*, 137, 142.

46. Durham, *Exodus*, 407. Durham states these to be “most holy” because of the combination of the holiness of the Lord's presence, coupled with the anointing of the holy anointing oil. However, the Lord did not dwell within the Tabernacle until after it was dedicated. Therefore this author sees the Tabernacle and its utensils as being “most holy” but in reverse order: the anointing oil makes them holy while the presence of the Lord makes them “most holy.” See also Wenham, *Leviticus*, 141.

47. For anointing as a symbol of an elevation in status, see Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 553.

48. Milgrom finds three problems with the order of the MT, and discusses these at

by bringing Aaron and his sons to the door of the tabernacle (vv. 2–4). Then Moses washed all of them, but dressed only Aaron (vv. 6–9); Leviticus implies that Aaron’s sons were not dressed until after Aaron was anointed (cf vv. 6–9 with v. 13). Next, “Moses took the anointing oil, and anointed the tabernacle and everything within it, and he made them holy. He then sprinkled some of it upon the altar seven times, and anointed the altar and all its utensils, and the laver and its base, in order to make them holy” (vv. 10–11). After Moses anointed the accoutrements of the tabernacle, “he poured some of the anointing oil upon Aaron’s head, and anointed him in order to make him holy” (v. 12). Following the anointing, Moses dressed Aaron’s sons and proceeded to offer sacrifices (vv. 13–30). During the third sacrifice, Aaron and his sons were *sprinkled* with a mixture of blood and holy anointing oil (v. 30)—(the text here does not use the word “to anoint” as it does with the tabernacle implements and Aaron (cf vv. 10–12; see also v. 30)). Gerald Klingbeil notes, “The repeated usage of the anointing oil on the objects of the sanctuary and the priests and the usage of the same verbal form of *חָשַׁם* (‘anoint’) suggests similar ritual states of both ‘entities.’”⁴⁹ That ritual state is marked by the scent of the Lord. In other words, the objects of the sanctuary and Aaron are now holy as the Lord is holy and participants with the Lord in his works toward Israel.

While the ritual of both Aaron and his sons takes place at the tabernacle, the order and timing of the anointing of Aaron is demonstrative of his being set apart to a higher realm.⁵⁰ For one, there was a pause between the anointing of Aaron’s sons and that of the tabernacle, its objects, and Aaron. That pause separated Aaron and his sons. Rather than being a visitor to the tabernacle (like the rest of Israel), or a servant (like his sons), Aaron is just as much a part of

length in *Leviticus 1–16*, 513–16. This paper deals with the MT as is and the implications it holds for the significance of the anointing of Aaron in comparison to that of his sons.

49. Gerald Klingbeil, “The Anointing of Aaron: A Study of Leviticus 8:12 in its OT and ANE Context,” *AUSS* 38, no. 2 (Autumn 2000): 233. While Klingbeil holds that Aaron’s sons were also anointed in Leviticus 8:30, the text obviates that by “priests” Klingbeil can mean only Aaron, since Leviticus 8 does not use the verb “to anoint” in regards to the priests, only in reference to the Tabernacle, its accoutrements, and Aaron (see also Levine, “Tabernacle Texts,” 311). It is true that the holy anointing oil is used upon Aaron’s sons, but this text does not explicitly state that they were anointed. Elsewhere in Exodus and Leviticus, Aaron’s sons are described as having been anointed. In light of such texts, Leviticus 8:30 provides the best textual representation of when that anointing took place; however, that verse does not use the verb *חָשַׁם*, as Klingbeil seems to imply in this quote. See also John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 112. Furthermore, Levine states that “Most of chapter 8 (vv. 6–36) is devoted to a description of two distinct yet related ceremonies: the consecration of the altar and tabernacle and of Aaron, the high priest (vv. 6–12); and the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, which was accomplished by a series of sacrificial and purificatory rites, performed over a period of seven days (vv. 13–36)” (Levine, *Leviticus*, 48; also Levine, “Tabernacle Texts,” 311). In light of all this, there seems to be an unequivocal differentiation made between the anointing of Aaron, which was the same as took place with the altar and the Tabernacle, and that of his sons.

50. See Deborah W. Rooke, *Zadok’s Heirs: The Role and Development of the High Priesthood in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21 n. 28.

the Lord's house as is the altar.⁵¹ Secondly, Aaron's sons were *sprinkled* with a mixture of anointing oil, whereas Aaron was specifically *anointed*. As previously mentioned, that anointment placed a greater amount of the Lord's scent upon Aaron, thus demarcating him as more holy and connected to the Lord than his sons. Furthermore, how he was anointed attests not only to his being set apart from his sons but also to his being an accoutrement of the tabernacle.⁵²

Method of Anointing

Ambiguity of the Anointing

The method of anointing is not explicitly stated in either Exodus or Leviticus. The prescription reads: "Then take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head, and anoint him" (Exod 29:7). The fulfillment reads: "And he [Moses] poured some of the anointing oil upon Aaron's head, and anointed him in order to make him holy" (Lev 8:12). In both Exodus and Leviticus, there is nothing telling about the verbal forms for "to pour" (יָצַק) and "to anoint" (מָשַׁח). However, in both passages, each of the verbs are prefixed, and thus separated, by a *waw*. Depending upon how this *waw* is read, this ritual of anointing could be seen as either a single act or a double act. Jacob Milgrom is a proponent of the single act anointing. He reads the *waw* as being "purposive, not conjunctive" thus rendering a translation of "thereby anointing."⁵³ Other scholars, such as Baruch Levine, read this *waw* as conjunctive rather than purposive.⁵⁴ Such a reading renders a translation of "poured and anointed." While there is not a definitive answer for how the *waw* is to be read, treating it as conjunctive provides a much richer meaning for the ritual of anointing.

By its meaning, the verb to anoint (מָשַׁח) exacerbates this ambiguity while simultaneously eradicating it. In Hebrew, מָשַׁח "denotes the act and process of wetting, rubbing, smearing, or anointing something, exclusively and usually with oil."⁵⁵ Thus, by definition, proponents of single action anointing can be appeased because pouring a liquid is synonymous with "the act and process of wetting." However, if מָשַׁח already connoted a process of wetting, there

51. Klingbeil states: "The anointing of Aaron . . . marks a crucial point inasmuch as it puts both the location and its objects and the person(s) on a par" (Klingbeil, "Anointing of Aaron," 236). While Klingbeil makes this claim in regards to Aaron's sons as well, I would argue that they are excluded from this equal relationship on grounds that they are anointed differently, with less oil, and only after a purposeful break in the anointing of the tabernacle and its accoutrements.

52. Levine declares, after mentioning the unique vestments of Aaron as high priest and stating his being anointed with the same oil as the tabernacle and altar, that "in effect, he [the high priest] was the human counterpart of the altar" (Levine, *Leviticus*, 48). In his article "Descriptive Tabernacle Texts," Levine states that "the High Priest is a sacred vessel and is consecrated as such" (Levine, "Tabernacle Texts," 311). See also Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 518.

53. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 518.

54. See Levine's translation of Leviticus 8:12 in his commentary (Levine, *Leviticus*, 52). See also Hartley, *Leviticus*, 105–6 and Wenham, *Leviticus*, 135.

55. Seybold, "מָשַׁח," *TDOT* 9:43–54.

would have been no need for Moses to be commanded to pour the oil because anointing would have already entailed that. But, if anointing referred to a distinct and separate action, the use of both *יצק* and *משח* would not have been redundant.

Whether *משח* marked a separate action, oil was poured upon the head of Aaron (see Exod 29:7 and Lev 8:12). Both Exodus and Leviticus are silent as to the quantity of anointing oil poured. Psalms, however, records a tradition that a copious amount was used: “Just as the precious oil upon the head is running upon the beard, the beard of Aaron; it is running over the opening of his garments” (Ps 133:2). The significance of the holy anointing oil has already been discussed at length. The pouring of the oil equated with a pouring of the scent, and thus the personality, of the Lord upon Aaron. If the tradition of Psalms is accurate, then much of Aaron’s body may well have been inundated with both the scent and personality of the Lord. Since the sons of Aaron were only sprinkled—which Aaron was as well—this inundation would have conferred a much more sublime consecration upon Aaron, further setting him apart from his sons.

The Symbol of the Anointing

If *משח* marked a separate action, it would have been a “rubbing” or “smearing” of some sort.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, nowhere in the Bible is this action explicitly identified. However, the Babylonian Talmud records the tradition that priests were anointed “in the shape of a chi” (b. Hor. 12A).⁵⁷ The *chi* is a Greek letter which takes the shape of an X. Before delving into the implications of this tradition, however, the credence of the Babylonian Talmud must first be established. The Babylonian Talmud dates to post–Second Temple Era, no earlier than 500 C.E. Currently, scholarship is divided over whether or not the anointing ritual of the High Priest dates to pre– or post–exilic Israel.⁵⁸ If it is considered pre–exilic, then the Babylonian Talmud is separated from Leviticus by over one thousand years. If the anointing ritual is considered post–exilic, the Babylonian Talmud is still distanced by up to one thousand years.⁵⁹ However, since the temple had already been destroyed for four hundred years prior to the compilation of the Talmud, the rabbis could not have been discussing a contemporary practice. Therefore, they must have been preserving an earlier tradition, perhaps from the Second Temple Period.

The Book of Ezekiel preserves a tradition that may link the Babylonian Talmud with the anointing ritual of the High Priest, whether or not the ritual

56. Seybold, *TDOT* 9:45.

57. Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An Academic Commentary: Bavli Tractate Horayot* (vol. 26; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1994), 76.

58. As a sample of the scholarly debate, see: Hartley, *Leviticus*, 110; Daniel Fleming, “The Biblical Tradition of Anointing Priests,” *JBL* 117, no. 3 (1998): 401–14; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 554; and Klingbeil, “Anointing of Aaron,” 231–43.

59. Rooke, *Zadok’s Heirs*, 21 mentions how the Babylonian Talmud designates a difference between the anointing of a king and priest; she also mentions how the Talmud dates from a considerably later period.

is of pre- or post-exilic date.⁶⁰ In chapter 9 Ezekiel has a vision in which he sees six men, one of which is clothed with white linen and is commanded by the Lord to “pass through the midst of the city—the midst of Jerusalem—and mark a mark upon the foreheads of the men who are sighing and groaning over all the abominations performed in the midst of her” (Ezek 9:4). In the Bible, linen is almost exclusively associated with sacred cloth, which includes priestly garments (see Exod 27: 9, 16, 18; 28:5, 6, 8, 15, 39, 42; Lev 6:10; 16:4, 23, 32; 1 Sam 2:18). As such, the man being addressed by the Lord is likely a priest, albeit a heavenly priest. This priest is instructed to “mark a mark” upon those who are righteous, those who detest the abominations and groan because of the wickedness of Jerusalem. Whatever this mark is, it is to be a sign to the other men Ezekiel saw in vision that those with the mark are not to be destroyed (see Ezek 9:6). The Hebrew word for this mark is *taw*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In proto-Hebrew, pre-Aramaic block script, the Hebrew *taw* had the shape of an X, or a cross.⁶¹ Thus the passage could read “mark an X upon the foreheads.” The parallelism between the Babylonian Talmud and the vision of Ezekiel is that both depict a mark in the shape of an X with an individual deemed righteous by God.⁶² Despite the Babylonian Talmud depicting a priest and Ezekiel depicting any righteous individual, the conceptual tradition seems to be the same.

In light of this, it is probable that after pouring holy anointing oil upon Aaron’s head, Moses then anointed him in the shape of an X. The significance of the X is found in the ancient custom where “the *taw* also served as a mark of ownership.”⁶³ In the context of the anointing of Aaron, Moses was commanded by the Lord to perform the anointing. As elsewhere demonstrated in the Bible, and as Leviticus clearly states, “Moses did as the Lord commanded him” (Lev 8:4; see also Exod 40:16, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27, 29, 32; Lev 8:, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29). Thus Moses was clearly acting for God. As such, Aaron was effectively anointed in such a way that God marked his ownership of him. Put another way, the anointing of Aaron in the shape of an X represented the Lord’s signature.⁶⁴ A signature marks approval and sanction of an action. It stands as a witness of the signer’s authority and presence wherever the signature goes.

Aaron’s sons were sprinkled with oil. While that may have been a form of anointment, in the same sense that the word *חשן* can denote “an act and

60. Ezekiel depicts a period of time prior to the Second Temple Period and the Babylonian Talmud preserves a tradition from either the First or Second Temple Period, or possibly from both. As such, if Ezekiel and the Babylonian Talmud share this tradition, it is highly probable that the ritual of anointing as depicted in Exodus and Leviticus also shares this tradition.

61. See Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 307.

62. The reason for the difference in calling the shape a *taw* or a *chi* was likely because the Rabbis, writing in the Hellenistic age, used the *chi* for the sake of familiarity; though it is distinctly possible they may have forgotten what the proto-Hebrew *taw* looked like.

63. Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 307.

64. Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 307.

process of wetting,⁶⁵ it was not as distinct a form of anointment as Aaron received by having oil first poured on his head, then being anointed with it. Thus, though the sons of Aaron were anointed, that anointment did not set them apart in the same way Aaron's anointing did.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Aaron was elevated above the status of his sons by his unique anointment. This has been demonstrated in three ways: (1) the holy anointing oil and its function as the scent of the Lord; (2) the tabernacle as the abode of the Lord and Aaron's anointing in direct succession to it; and (3) Aaron being anointed in the shape of a *taw*, signifying the Lord's signature and approval. Each of these arguments validates Milgrom's statement that, "the anointment 'sanctifies' the high priest by removing him from the realm of the profane and empowering him to operate in the realm of the sacred, namely, to handle the sancta."⁶⁶ Since the Lord claims the holy anointing oil as his own (Exod 30:31), it becomes holy because "God's holiness rubs off . . . on whatever is close to Him or belongs to Him."⁶⁷ Furthermore, holy things in general confer their holiness upon those who touch them (see Exod 29:37; 30:29; Lev 6:27–29). Therefore, as soon as the holy anointing oil touched Aaron, he became holy. Likewise when the tabernacle was anointed it too became holy. Aaron was in the tabernacle precinct when he was anointed (see Exod 29:4; Lev 8:2–4, 10–12); therefore not only did the oil make him holy, but so did his vicinity to the holy artifacts of the Lord; Aaron was doubly holy. Finally, the shape with which Aaron was anointed was the pinnacle of the entire ritual. It unequivocally signified the Lord's acceptance of what Aaron was anointed with, where he was anointed, and how he was anointed.

While Aaron's sons also had holy anointing oil sprinkled upon them in the tabernacle precinct, the amount of the oil placed upon Aaron and the timing of Aaron's anointment during the dedication of the tabernacle clearly distinguished between him and his sons. Aaron's sons—along with Aaron—were sprinkled with a combination of holy anointing oil and sacrificial blood. There is no doubt this ritual sanctified all who were thus sprinkled (see Lev 8:30). However, Aaron was additionally anointed with an amount of oil that may well have soaked through his entire raiment, thus bathing him in the holy anointing oil (see Ps 133:2). Aaron's sons—along with Aaron—were sprinkled in the tabernacle precinct towards the end of the three sacrifices of the inauguration ceremony. However, Aaron was earlier anointed in the nonstop chain of anointings that dedicated the tabernacle and its accoutrements into the Lord's service. Thus Aaron became a vessel of the Lord's house and an instrument to help bring about the purity and atonement of Israel. All this was ultimately sealed upon Aaron during his anointment when the Lord, through Moses, signed his name in the shape of the *taw*.

65. Seybold, *TDOT* 9:45.

66. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 554.

67. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 291.