

The Journal *of* *Theological Studies*

OCTOBER, 1905

THE ORIGIN OF THE AARONITE PRIESTHOOD.

EVERY reader of the JOURNAL has reason to be grateful to Prof Kennett for his article on the origin of the Aaronite priesthood¹. He presented a bird's-eye view of a great part of the material available for the discussion of a most difficult problem; and the skill with which he handled the material was calculated to carry the reader away into an immediate acceptance of his results. But he would be himself the last to deny that the problems connected with the Aaronite priesthood are difficult. And a very careful study of his article has failed to convince me that the history has been rightly reconstructed; there appear to be some bones which will not fit into the conjectural skeleton.

The crucial point in the theory is that Jeroboam I did not found the calf-worship at Bethel and Dan as is related of him in 1 Kings xii 26-33, but that in the pre-Isaianic period Aaron was honoured as the founder of the cult. Early tradition had contained a story of Aaron's action at Horeb, but 'the orthodoxy of a later generation added the story of Moses' wrath at the discovery of the image and of his destruction of it'. But it is natural to ask, Why did the writer of 1 Kings xii 26-33 select Jeroboam I as the founder of the cult? If this writer was post-Deuteronomic, he had before him the full story of Exod. xxxii, and the reference to Moses' anger in Deut. ix 12-21. And it could serve no object whatever to ascribe to any later founder the beginnings of a cult which had long ago been

¹ *J. T. S.* January, 1905 (vol. vi No. 22).

ascribed to Aaron; it would neither increase Aaron's discredit nor save his reputation. Again, why did he relate that Jeroboam placed a calf at Dan? There is no other evidence in the Old Testament that Dan possessed a calf unless it is to be found in Am. viii 14; but if it was not true, or if there had not been at least a tradition to that effect, it is difficult to see with what object a post-Deuteronomic writer should have gone out of his way to state the fact¹.

Prof Kennett argues that the statement of the compiler of the Book of Kings can have but little historical value, 'considering his complete ignorance of the origin of the priesthood at Dan as it is given in the Book of Judges'². But this is surely a *non sequitur*. Apart from the possibility 'that Jeroboam may have reorganized an existing sanctuary, presenting to it a new idol' (which is certainly the impression produced by the narrative), ignorance of the ancient origin of the priesthood of a far-off sanctuary need not have affected his knowledge of the acts of Jeroboam.

On the next page (168) Prof Kennett himself suggests a difficulty. 'If the northern tradition honoured Aaron as the founder of the cult of the calf, and believed that he lived during the Exodus, how are we to account for the fact that the tradition of the Judges takes no account of his priesthood nor of the golden calf which he made?' The answer is scarcely sufficient that 'the greatest uncertainty prevailed as to the exact time when certain legendary or eponymous heroes had flourished, and legendary events had taken place'. Jair's colonization of eastern Manasseh, and the naming of the place Hormah, are comparatively obscure items of knowledge, about which uncertainty might easily prevail. And particular military achievements of two successive kings,

¹ Jos. B. J. IV i 1 speaks of 'the temple of the golden cow', at a spot corresponding to the position of Dan, as though the ruins were still visible.

² The following words—'It is, however, evident that he considered Dan and Bethel to have been the chief sanctuaries of the northern kingdom'—appear to conflict with the remark at the end of the preceding page, with reference to the post-Deuteronomic author of 1 Kings xii 26-33: 'from his words it would naturally be inferred that down to the time of Jeroboam neither Dan nor Bethel had possessed either sanctuary, image, or priesthood.' If, however, the post-Deuteronomic author of 1 Kings xii 26-33 and the compiler of the Book of Kings are different persons, the latter nowhere mentions Dan and Bethel as sanctuaries, unless it be in 1 Kings x 29, which is an explicit reference to the story of Jeroboam.

such as Saul and David, might be erroneously ascribed to one or the other. But none of these is quite analogous to the present case, in which 'the writer of 1 Kings xii 26-33 was misinformed, or drew a wrong inference, as to the founding of the sanctuary of Bethel'. On the other hand, there is not necessarily a difficulty in the fact that Aaron was unpunished for his sin, while 3,000 men were slain by Levites. There are many critics who hold that Exod. xxxii 25-29 is from another source than that of verses 1-6, 15-24. And if Aaron suffered no punishment, neither did Jeroboam; both are condemned by the religious compilers as having committed a terrible sin in making Israel to sin.

The doubt as to the historical character of the account of Jeroboam's action at Bethel involves a doubt as to Josiah's desecration of his altar and *bamah* in 2 Kings xxiii 15-20. Prof Kennett says (p. 171 note) that the account of Josiah's dealings with Bethel is 'shewn to be a later addition by a comparison with verse 8, which states that Josiah carried out his reforms from *Geba* to Beersheba. *Bethel* therefore lay outside Josiah's jurisdiction, and the story of its desecration, so far as it is historical, belongs to a later date.' But verse 8 is not difficult to explain. Verses 4-14 describe Josiah's iconoclasm in Judah, and then in verse 15 the writer turns to his reforms in the north—'and also (נני) the altar that was at Bethel' &c. The expression 'Geba to Beersheba' is used to shew how thoroughly the purging of Judah was carried out; but it does not preclude any work outside Judah. There is nothing to shew that the story of Josiah's desecration of Bethel is unhistorical; and if it be historical, the Bethelite succession of priests came to an end in the last quarter of the seventh century.

But with this is involved the much larger question raised by Prof Kennett as to the relation between Josiah's reforms and the legislation of the Book of Deuteronomy. He suggests that the book which was found in the temple 'may have been the code of J. For the reform when once begun may well have gone beyond the law which gave to it its original impetus. It may, however, have been a prophetic work, e.g. Micah. The whole account of Josiah's reforms, although not all of one date, is probably all later than the Book of Deuteronomy which has coloured the language throughout'. And he assigns the com-

pilation of Deuteronomy, as a whole, to exilic times. 'The phrases of Deuteronomy are due to the permanent impression which Jeremiah left on the religious language of his people.' The generally accepted theories as to the literary origins of the Hexateuch are thus called in question. It is far too large a matter to be adequately discussed in a short article. But one great objection can be raised to an exilic date for the Book of Deuteronomy. The distinction between the Levitical priests the sons of Zadok, and the Levites 'arose from the unwillingness of the sons of Zadok, the priests of Jerusalem, to admit to like privileges with themselves the Levites, who until the days of Josiah's reformation had ministered in the various local sanctuaries or high places'. If the Book of Deuteronomy was compiled in exilic times, it was after the long quarrel between the Jerusalem priests and the country Levites. The former had gone into captivity, and the latter were established in Jerusalem. Would it not be expected that some sign of the past controversy would shew itself? Prof Kennett points out the scantiness of the mention of Aaron in Deuteronomy, and suggests that 'his name was there introduced by one of the several editors, who endeavoured to supply what must have seemed to all later readers an obvious omission'. This is extremely probable; but is it not in favour of an early rather than a late date for the book? If the acute antagonism between the Zadokites and the Aaronites had existed for years before, would not the Levites have been called 'the sons of Aaron'? If Deuteronomy, in its original form, did not mention Aaron, it must have been because it was written before the quarrel began. Deut. xviii 1-8 can be understood most simply if it pictures an early stage in the reform, when the country Levites were first bidden to leave their sanctuaries.

Again, Prof Kennett says: 'It is not improbable that the code of J represents an early effort of the reforming party to formulate a law for Judah.' And 'the intention of the original reformers' was 'that the priests who were thrown out of employment by the abolition of the country sanctuaries should have the right to earn a livelihood by ministering in the Temple at Jerusalem'. Does not this imply that the law of the single sanctuary was the intention of the compiler, or compilers, of J? And the

same thing, with regard to E, is implied in the words, 'the persecution of the reformers and their flight into N. Israel, which we have seen to be probable, may not improbably have given the impetus to a similar movement in the latter country'. But is it possible that such reformers would have allowed the altar law in Exod. xx 24 to stand? or that they would have preserved the narratives in which the patriarchs offered sacrifice freely at local sanctuaries or sacred spots?—narratives which were surely intended to reflect, and to interpret historically, the religious usage of the times when they were compiled.

With regard to post-exilic developments the accounts are so vague and meagre that it is extremely difficult to construct any scheme. Though the genealogy of Joshua in 1 Chron. vi 13-15 may very possibly be an 'unhistorical artificiality'—as the genealogies of the Chronicler often are—yet Seraiah and Jehozadak were both historical persons, and there is no direct evidence to shew that the former was not the father of the latter. And though Prof Kennett admits that 'opinion is still by no means unanimous as to the amount of weight which is to be assigned to the account given in Chronicles—Ezra—Nehemiah of the return under Zerubbabel', yet 'the whole theory now set forth assumes that it is unhistorical', so that those who cannot accept the reasons which he gives for this assumption, must hesitate to accept his whole theory. Moreover Zech. vi 9-15, which plays such an important part in the argument, is useless if one does not first accept Wellhausen's emendation by which 'Zerubbabel' is substituted for 'Joshua the son of Jehozadak', and then 'read between the lines' thus formed.

It is always easier to criticize than to construct. And the following suggestions can make no claim to the completeness and elaboration which mark Prof Kennett's article. They are purely tentative, but may serve to suggest another line of investigation towards the solving of some of the problems.

The term 'Levite', as is well known, was somewhat analogous in the early days of Israel to the term 'clergyman' to-day. A man of any tribe could be a Levite. In Judges xvii the young Levite was of the family of Judah. But it was the invariable tendency of the Hebrews to attempt to account for

existing facts and institutions by referring them to the initiative or authority of some early hero of the race. Moses was the greatest of such heroes; and within a comparatively short time after the entrance into Canaan, every existing feature of civil and religious polity was traced to him. The origin of the term 'Levite' having been forgotten, it was attributed to the existence of a tribe of Levi, and Moses was held to be the greatest representative of the tribe. (Or, as some think, there was a real tribe of Levi, of which Moses was a member, and the term 'Levite', though originally unconnected with it, was understood to imply lineal descent from Levi the tribal ancestor.) That Moses was held to be the founder of the priesthood appears in the early northern poem in Deut. xxxiii. In verse 8 he 'whom thou didst prove at Massah, with whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah' is clearly Moses, of the tribe of Levi; and to him is ascribed the possession of the Thummim and Urim. Levites, or clergymen, then, were held to be descendants of Moses. An instance of this is seen in Judg. xviii 30. At Dan, in the far north, where early ideas would linger undisturbed, the priesthood descended from the young Levite of the family of Judah claimed lineal descent from Moses.

So long as Moses was considered as the supreme priest tradition declared that the *aedituus* of the sanctuary in the desert was a young servant—Joshua an Ephraimite (Exod. xxxiii 7-11). But as time went on, Moses was thought of more and more exclusively as a Lawgiver; and when that aspect of his work grew into overwhelming prominence, and Joshua had become a warrior hero, the priestly work was gradually ascribed to another subordinate. The personality of Moses so fills the early narratives that scarcely any other individual figures emerge into view. But Aaron seems to have been a *sheik* of some importance (Exod. xxiv 1, 14; xvii 10, 12), and to him Moses was believed to have delegated the sacerdotal functions. This affords the best explanation of Exod. iv 14 'Aaron thy brother the Levite'. The addition of 'the Levite' would be superfluous if it denoted merely tribal lineage. Having been constituted a Levite or clergyman, he must also be the 'brother' of Moses. And signs perhaps survived till a late date in the similarity of the names in different branches of the family. Moses has a son

Eliezer (Exod. xviii 4), while Aaron's son, through whom the priesthood descended, was named Eleazar (Num. xx 25-28). One of the three Levitical families was descended from Gershon, a son of Levi (Exod. vi 16), while Moses' elder son was named Gershom (ii 22). And the name Mushi, which is not far removed from Mosheh, is the son of Merari, Levi's third son (vi 19).

That the tradition of Aaron's priesthood was not universal we have seen in the case of the Danite establishment. But it is no less clear that other places than Bethel claimed for their priests the Aaronic succession. However much 1 Sam. i, ii may have been interpolated in accordance with later conceptions, there can be no doubt that the family of Eli at Shiloh traced their descent from Aaron, since Eli named one of his sons Phinehas, which was the name of Aaron's grandson to whom was given the covenant of an everlasting priesthood (Num. xxv 10-13¹).

In post-exilic times, when the Zadokite priests had returned to Jerusalem, *their* descent was traced to Aaron through Eleazar (1 Chron. vi 3-8), and the house of Eli is completely ignored by the Chronicler. But 1 Sam. ii 28, 35 distinctly gives Eli's family the precedence in the past, while 'the faithful priest' that is to come will be raised or set up as the beginning of a new succession. Again, the descendants of Eli (see 1 Sam. xiv 3) subsequently appeared at Nob (1 Sam. xxi 1, xxii 11 ff). And when Abiathar, who escaped from the massacre, was afterwards deposed by Solomon from his priesthood at Jerusalem, he was sent to Anathoth, where a line of priests established itself of whom Jeremiah was a member (Jer. i 1). Thus there were, from time to time, priests in Shiloh, Nob, and Anathoth who claimed Aaronic descent through Eleazar. And it is in the highest degree probable that in many local sanctuaries throughout Israel the same claim was made. In some cases the claim was made through Eleazar, and in some, apparently, through Ithamar; for after the exile, when the Zadokites had claimed descent through Eleazar, the Ithamar families of priests in Jerusalem

¹ This is, of course, a late priestly story; but the succession Aaron, Eleazar, Phinehas was probably an early growth. The 'hill of Phinehas' (Josh. xxiv 33) must have been an early local name, and may imply the presence of a sanctuary in the hill country of Ephraim, of which the priests traced their descent from Aaron.

were declared to be eight in number, while the Eleazar families were sixteen (1 Chron. xxiv 5, 6¹). Further—to indulge, for the moment, in conjecture—the story of Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron², who offered ‘strange fire’ (Lev. x 1-10), may point to the fact that some country priests had traced their descent to Aaron through Nadab and Abihu, but that the claim was not allowed. Since Bethel was the foremost sanctuary of northern Israel, its priests would probably be considered among the most important Aaronites. But the point which needs emphasizing is that from the very small amount of evidence which exists it would seem that the Aaronite succession was a claim which was very widely made by country priests outside Jerusalem.

Now when the local sanctuaries were abolished, and the country priests came crowding into Jerusalem, it was natural, as Prof Kennett points out, that serious friction would arise. And, as he says, ‘the sons of Zadok are represented as superior to the Levites, not by reason of their descent from Zadok, but by the fact that they only have remained faithful to the sanctuary at Jerusalem now regarded as alone orthodox. It is, so to speak, not so much a question of canonical ordination as of canonical behaviour after ordination’. But they would have a much stronger pretext for superiority than faithfulness to the single sanctuary. The chief charge which they would level against the whole mass of priests who claimed to be Aaronites would be that of image-worship (see Ezek. xliv 10-12). Images had been commonly used in many, if not all, of the northern sanctuaries. Even Hosea (iii 4) thought of some of them as an integral part of Jehovah worship, though he condemned molten images. But among the various forms of images it is quite improbable (apart from the statement of Jeroboam’s action at Dan) that the bull in particular was confined to Bethel. Hos. xiii 2 appears to represent the sin of ‘kissing the calves’ as general in Ephraim; and many writers, as is well known, hold that the same form of worship was practised at Gilgal and Beersheba (Am. iv 4, v 5, viii 14; Hos. iv 15, ix 15, xii 11 (12))

¹ This arrangement is put back by the chronicler to the reign of David.

² It is noticeable that in Exod. xxiv 1, 2 they, with Aaron, are not spoken of as priests, but are merely mentioned in conjunction with ‘elders of Israel’.

—in the case of the former, writers as early as Cyril and Epiphanius. Indeed, differences of opinion exist not so much about the wide prevalence of bull worship, as about the source from which Israel learnt it¹. And the surest method of condemning the practice of image-worship was to relate that Aaron, the great ancestor of the country Levites, had been guilty of the very same practice, and had been condemned for it. Exod. xxxii presents some very complicated problems. One difficulty, which does not concern us here, is that in verses 18, 19 Moses appears to learn for the first time of the people's sin when he descends from the mountain, whereas in verse 8 he has been already forewarned of it by God. But passing over verses 7-14, there are, in the remainder of the chapter, two distinct narratives. In verse 25 'Moses saw that the people were broken loose'. This is the beginning of a narrative (verses 25-29) which explains the consecration of the Levites to Divine service. They inflicted punishment on the people for an offence which seems to have been of the form of a civil rebellion. The narrative of the golden calf², on the other hand (verses 1-6, 15-24, 30-35), contains no account of punishment, but only of Moses' anger and intercession. It is this narrative which may well have arisen in the course of the strife between the Zadokite priests and the country clergy. The true and loyal Levites were, by the combination of the narratives, represented as inflicting punishment for the image-worship which had been instigated by Aaron; and, on the same grounds, the true and loyal Zadokites in Jerusalem strenuously resisted the Aaronite clergy. This was not 'inventing sins for their saints'; it was inventing a sin for the saint of their ecclesiastical opponents.

A. H. McNEILE.

¹ See art. 'Kalb (goldenes)' in *PRE*³.

² The occurrence both in the Aaron and the Jeroboam narrative of the words 'These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt' shews that one has affected the other; but it is impossible to decide to which the words first belonged—unless the plural 'gods' is to be pressed, in which case it must refer to the two bulls erected by Jeroboam. Even the Aaron narrative has signs of complexity. 'He received *it* and fashioned *it*' (v. 4) does not follow naturally the plural 'golden rings', though the singular is in place in v. 24. Moreover 'And *they* said' (v. 4 b), 'And Aaron saw [*it*], and built an altar before *it*' (v. 5) are not quite clear. And v. 35 appears to be composite.