

# The People of God in the Priestly Source

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One of the four major literary sources in the Pentateuch is called the Priestly source (P). The term "Priestly source" is based on the interest of this source stratum in cultic and ritual institutions and priestly regulations. The P source is not merely a cultic code but also a genuine historical work accepted as such by scholars.<sup>1</sup> This source shows a peculiar literary style, a love for genealogies and numbers and an emphasis upon cultic holiness and purity. P is not a literary unit but a literary composite. For it has incorporated early and late materials and achieved its present form through a process of gradual growth and subsequent redactions. It is generally agreed that the P source is dealing with traditions which belong mainly to Judah and Jerusalem. Concerning the date of this work, there are differences of opinion among the scholars. M. Noth and, following Noth, R. E. Clements,<sup>2</sup> think that this source should be dated before the dedication of the Temple in 515 B.C.; others like Fohrer and Eissfeldt are of the opinion that it might have been written in the 5th century (ca. 475-450 B.C.), later than Malachi and earlier than Chronicles.<sup>3</sup> What matters here is that P was written in the post-exilic period but pictures the history of the pre-exilic period. Let us study our topic under the following headings.

## 1. Hebrew terms used to denote the People of God in P

Many Hebrew words are used to refer to Israel as the people of God, for example '*am*, *qahal*, '*edah*, *miqra*'. Of all these words *qahal* and '*edah* are the important ones in P.

The word *qahal* occurs 21 times in P to refer to Israel. (Including the interpolated passages, these are Gen. 28:3; 48:4; 35:11; Exod. 12:6; 16:3; Lev. 4:13, 14, 21; 16:17, 33; Num. 10:17; 14:5; 15:5; 16:3, 33; 17:12; 19:20; 20:4, 6, 10, 12.) It is usually translated as "assembly." The BDB lexicon gives the following meanings for *qahal*: assembly, convocation, congregation and company.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, 1962, p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> R. E. Clements, *God and Temple*, 1965, pp. 111, 122.

<sup>3</sup> O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament. An Introduction*, 1966, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> F. Brown et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1972, p. 874.

The word *'edah* occurs 100 times in P (including the interpolated passages like Exod. 16; Num. 13, 14, 16) to refer to Israel. This word is usually translated as "congregation" and on certain occasions as "company" (e.g. Num. 16:16) by RSV. The BDB lexicon gives the meanings congregation and company for *'edah*,<sup>5</sup> the KB lexicon gives gathering, company and congregation.

If both *qahal* and *'edah* refer to Israel as congregation or assembly, is there any distinctiveness or difference between them in their use by P? My study (a separate study is done on the use and meaning of *qahal* and *'edah*) has led me to conclude that both *qahal* and *'edah* are general terms and not technical terms. Both of them are used to refer to a group of people or to a community of people in an ordinary sense. For example, *qahal* in Gen. 28:3; 35:11; 48:4 and Exod. 12:6 refers to Israel as a group of people and not in a religious sense or as a cult community.<sup>6</sup> In the same way *'edah* in Num. 1:18; 14:2; 16:26; 17:11; 20: 1, 22 means Israel as a group of people and not in the sense of cult community. Only when these words are used in a religious context like worship do they carry in them a religious connotation and mean Israel as a religious or cult community. For example, *qahal* in the context of Lev. 4:14, 21; 16:33, and *'edah* in the context of Lev. 8:3; 9:5; 10:17; Num. 3:7; 15:24 denote Israel as a cult community of Yahweh.

There is no distinction, therefore, between *qahal* and *'edah*. They are used by P freely and interchangeably (Num. 16:3; 16:46; Lev. 4:13-15, 21) to refer to Israel either in a general sense or in a religious sense. Only in Lev. 4:13-21 do we get the idea that *'edah* in vss. 13 and 15 is different from *qahal* in vss. 13 and 14. But it is not so. The confusion in Lev. 4:13-21 is mainly because of later interpolation and secondary additions which are explained in detail by M. Noth.<sup>7</sup> So there is no distinction as such between *qahal* and *'edah* in P; rather they are synonymous. They mean Israel as a cult community when they are used in a religious context. That the P writer prefers *'edah* to *qahal* to refer to Israel is clear from the greater frequency of its occurrence.

## 2. Membership of the People of God in P

The members of the people of God, according to P, are the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 17:3-8) and that too in the line of Isaac and not in the line of Ishmael (Gen. 17:19-21). That Abraham and his descendants alone are the members of Yahweh's worshipping community and Yahweh alone is the object of their faith and worship is clear in the famous phrase of P: "I will be their God" (Gen. 17:8). Notice too Lev. 20:26: "You shall be holy to me . . .

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>6</sup> M. Noth, *Exodus*, 1962, p. 95, comments on Exod. 12:6: "In Egypt, Israel was not really a cult community even for P."

<sup>7</sup> M. Noth, *Leviticus*, 1965, pp. 40 f.

I have separated you from the peoples that you should be mine' (cf. Lev. 26:12).

If Abraham and his descendants are the members of the worshipping community of Yahweh, how are they related to or connected with Yahweh? P says that they are connected with Yahweh through Yahweh's covenant. Gen. 17:2 says that Yahweh made a covenant with Abraham, and 17:7, developing this further, points out that the covenant is not only with Abraham, but also with his descendants throughout their generations. Vs. 7 explains that it is an everlasting covenant. "It is therefore a reference to its timeless validity."<sup>8</sup>

Now what is the purpose of the covenant which Yahweh made with Israel? In Gen. 17:7 God says to Abraham that the main purpose of the covenant is "to be God to you and to your descendants after you." Thus "I will be their God" (vs. 8) and they will be his cult community. This idea, symbolised by the phrases "to be God to you" or "I will be their God" stands as a third element in Yahweh's promise to the patriarchs in the P narratives.

This is a significant addition made by P to the original promise of Yahweh, probably because of his retrospective look into the pre-exilic situation from the post-exilic period. Von Rad says: "But as an element of tradition, this 'I will be God to you' does not belong originally to the ancient patriarchal promise, but is, rather, an antedating of the substance of the covenant at Sinai, for the two really old patriarchal promises are posterity and land."<sup>9</sup> Thus P makes it clear that Israel became Yahweh's worshipping community through Yahweh's covenant with Abraham.

### 3. The Mark of the People of God in P

If Israel became Yahweh's worshipping community through his covenant, then what is the mark of the people of God who came into being through this covenant? Gen. 17:10-11 says, "This is my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised . . . and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." The sign or mark of the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham and his descendants is circumcision.<sup>10</sup> Circumcision as a sign is not only required from Abraham and his offspring but also from all those foreigners who are brought by Israel to work. We can notice here the idea of extended family as outlined by A.R. Johnson.<sup>11</sup> But it is not known whether such foreigners who were circumcised were also included in the membership of Yahweh's

<sup>8</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 1963<sup>2</sup>, p. 200.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>10</sup> R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 1961, p. 46f. gives the details.

<sup>11</sup> A. R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*, 1961, p. 4.

worshipping community and whether the worship of Yahweh was demanded of them. One fact is clear: if any male Israelite, including members of the extended family, fails to adopt circumcision, he is to be excommunicated from society. The phrase "... shall be cut off from his people" in Gen. 17:14 scarcely means the death penalty, but rather exclusion from the sacred community, "a kind of excommunication, which also meant ruin for the ones concerned."<sup>12</sup> So failure to adopt circumcision as the sign or mark by any individual means the severing of his relationship first with Yahweh and secondly with his community.

We need not go into details about circumcision. It is sufficient to say here that circumcision was only a sociological and racial custom at the beginning. W. Eichrodt points out that it was a puberty rite by which the young husband was consecrated and the fertility of the marriage guaranteed, and not an official practice of the cult. But the Hebrews gave it a religious significance as an act of bodily purification and dedication by which the person was admitted into the community of Yahweh and identified as a member of the people of Yahweh in contrast with the uncircumcised gentiles.<sup>13</sup> The giving of a religious significance to circumcision may have happened in the 7th century B.C., "as a reaction against the flooding of Judah with Assyrian and Babylonian religious customs especially since circumcision was not normally practised in Mesopotamia."<sup>14</sup> The P writer takes this religious significance and connects it with Yahweh's covenant with Abraham and thus makes it a sign or mark of relationship between Yahweh and his people. Even though "circumcision is not the condition on which the covenant is made but only a 'witness' to the covenant,"<sup>15</sup> it became an obligation on the part of the recipient of the covenant. In this way circumcision, a practice of originally only limited importance, became a symbol of Yahweh's worshipping community.<sup>16</sup>

The distinctiveness of the members of Yahweh's people from others expressed or interpreted through the act of circumcision is also explained in terms of holiness. The usage of the word *qadosh* makes this clear. The P writer points out that Israel is holy to Yahweh because he is holy and has separated them from other peoples (Lev. 20:26; cf. 19:2). They are holy because Yahweh has not only separated them from others but also delivered them from Egypt (Lev. 11:40-45; cf. 25:55; 26:13). The study of the word *qadosh* proves that it means first "separation to" and secondly "separation

<sup>12</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 201.

<sup>13</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, 1961, p. 138; Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 138, fn. 6.

<sup>15</sup> C. D. Jathanna, "The Covenant and Covenant Making in the Pentateuch," *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. III, No. 1, 1969, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

from."<sup>17</sup> So Israel is separated to Yahweh and expected to be of Yahweh's nature.

Holiness, according to P, is a physical purification and sanctification. It is spoken of in terms of observing purity according to the cultic acts. The member of Yahweh's community is not permitted to eat certain birds and animals (Lev. ch. 11) because they are unclean, not permitted to come into contact with lepers (Lev. 13:3) and with women during menstruation (Lev. 15:19-27) and so on. Whether a person is clean or unclean is decided by the priest (Lev. 10:10f.; 13:3, 8). The holiness of each individual is dependent upon his observance of purity. Holiness, which has been lost, can be restored again by performing proper ritual acts like anointing with oil. What we see in P is a holiness which is contagious in character and static in nature.

One significant point to be noticed in P regarding holiness is that the camp of Israel is holy because Yahweh's tabernacle is in their midst (Lev. 15:31); this is tantamount to Yahweh himself being among them. So any unclean thing or person should be removed from the camp, otherwise it will defile Yahweh's tabernacle.

If circumcision is the mark or *status confessionis* of the people of God, then holiness is the nature of the community.

#### 4. The Ministry of the People of God in P

The concept of the ministry of the people of God in P includes, among other things, the ministers like priests and Levites, the place of worship, sacrifices and offerings, cult instruments such as the ark.

According to P, Aaron and his sons are the priests and they take up the ministry after anointing and consecration by Moses (Lev. 8:1-3, 30). One of the important duties of the priests is the giving of *torah*. By *torah* we have to understand the priests' instruction of the laity which was probably chiefly concerned with questions about purity and impurity.<sup>18</sup> The Levites were from the tribe of Levi and they were to help the priests. Their function was a protective and atoning one for the rest of the tribes so that no wrath of God should be upon the community (Num. 1:53; 8:19).

The place of worship quite often mentioned in the P source is before the "tent of meeting" (*'ohel mo'ed*) also known as "the tent of witness" (*'ohel ha'eduth*) or "dwelling place of witness" (*mishkan ha'eduth*) or tabernacle (*mishkan*). According to P, the instruction concerning the establishment of the cult was given by Yahweh at Sinai. P does not narrate a covenant ceremony at Sinai like E. For P, the revelation of God at Sinai and the giving of the directions through Moses is the fulfilment of the covenant of circumcision made

<sup>17</sup> N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, 1962, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 245.

with Abraham. For P, the Sinai covenant is not important; rather he looks at the Sinai event as the founding of Israel's cult. It is here that Yahweh gives details about "the tent of meeting," the ark and about his *kabod* (Exod. 25:31).

In summarizing our study we can say that membership of the people of God in P, though in the line of Isaac, is not automatic. The mark of the people of God is circumcision. This involves accepting the whole teaching of Moses given on Mount Sinai. The people of God in P is a holy community and its ministry includes an ordained ministry, a cultic place, instruments, sacrificial offerings and festivals.