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RITUAL TEXTUALIZATION IN THE PRIESTLY TRADITIONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE AND LATE BABYLONIAN PRIESTLY LITERATURE*

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As the ritual theorist Catherine Bell claims, ritual texts are best understood when read within their specific historical contexts.[1] To Bell, ritual texts are more than a "formulation, representation, or expression of their context;" they are "dynamic *agents of change*" that help create and restructure social situations.[2] As such, processes of ritual textualization are both informed by the historical developments that caused the ritual to be written down in a particular way, and also reshape the socio-political landscape by promoting particular ritual norms and socio-religious hierarchies. When studying processes of ritual textualization in the ancient Near East, scholars face considerable obstacles to identifying the historical processes that informed the textualization of ritual, owing to the fragmentary nature of the surviving texts and the evidential gaps that concern their contexts of composition. Such obstacles are particularly acute in the case of the ritual texts of the Hebrew Bible, the majority of which are found in the so-called Priestly traditions of the Pentateuch. These ritual materials are all embedded in a long narrative source ("P"), which has itself been integrated into a composite Pentateuch. This source never refers directly to its historical setting but rather maintains an imaginary scenario during the time of Moses and the Israelites' encampment at Sinai. Yet, despite its literary character, many scholars argue

* An earlier version of this article was presented in September 2024 at the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean Workshop of Harvard University, where we received many valuable comments that helped refine the argument. We wish also to thank the anonymous reviewers at the Journal of Hebrew Scriptures for their helpful remarks. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of ancient sources are our own.

[1] Catherine Bell, "Ritualization of Texts and Textualization of Ritual in the Codification of Taoist Liturgy," *HR* 27.4 (1988): 366–92; Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 136–40.

[2] Bell, "Ritualization," 368–69, emphasis original.

that P preserves several hints that it was initially composed during the social and cultic upheaval of the Neo-Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, and that its lengthy ritual instructions were developed in response to the challenge of rebuilding the temple and reestablishing cultic practice during the early years of the Achaemenid era. Others, however, oppose such interpretations as "pseudo-historicism" that fundamentally misunderstands the imaginative character of P and rests on subjective assessments that lack verification.[3]

In this article, we explore the historical context of ritual textualization in P in the light of an important, yet largely overlooked set of comparative evidence: namely, the cuneiform temple ritual texts of the Late Babylonian Priestly Literature (LBPL). Such a comparison is warranted by the broad similarities between P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts in terms of their form and content; as ritual corpora, both sets of materials seemingly outline rules for ritual observance in broadly similar circumstances, such as annual festivals, daily offering cycles, and situations of contact with impure elements. The comparison is also merited by the distinctive discursive characteristics that P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts share—characteristics that tend to distinguish them from other ritual traditions from the southern Levant and Mesopotamia respectively. These unique features include their concern to integrate their ritual materials into larger corpora that promote priestly hegemony (what might be termed in both cases "priestly literature"), their interest in articulating ritual behavior in a way that does not rely on royal agency, and their tendency to describe ritual action in an idealized way. These similarities, we argue, add powerful weight to the theory that the textualization of ritual in P was inspired by similar historical dynamics to those that informed the textualization of ritual in the LBPL; namely, the cultic disruption caused by foreign imperial interference and temple destruction, and, more pressingly, the challenges of rebuilding the temple in the absence of a local king who held a stake in the cultic restoration.

The article begins by introducing the Priestly ritual texts of the Pentateuch and the scholarly debates that surround their genre, historical setting, and comparison with other ritual materials from the ancient Near East. We then turn to the temple ritual texts of the LBPL and the distinctive discursive traits that they share in common with P, before we explore the similar historical pressures that provoked comparable processes of ritual textualization at Babylon, Uruk, and Jerusalem. The article concludes by addressing the implications of this analysis for the historical study of P and ritual textualization in ancient Israel, Babylonia, and the ancient Near East more broadly.

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[3] Direct quote from Benjamin D. Sommer, "Dating Pentateuchal Texts and the Perils of Pseudo-Historicism," in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, eds. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch Schwartz, FAT 78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 85–108.

1 RITUAL GENRE, HISTORY, AND COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO P

The Priestly ritual texts form part of a larger narrative of origins that climaxes with the Israelites' arrival at Sinai and the divine command to build a mobile tent shrine in the wilderness.[4] Found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the ritual texts comprise detailed lists and instructions concerning the sacrifices, initiation rites, purity practices, and other festal and cultic ceremonies that are to be performed at the wilderness sanctuary or within the Israelite camp, and with the ritual oversight of Aaron (the first high priest) and his sons.[5] These texts do not provide comprehensive directions as to how the various rituals should be performed. They instead focus on specific aspects of the ritual procedure, which together provide an outline of the ritual's basic structure.[6] The Priestly ritual texts share various stylistic features, most notably a preference for casuistic ("if … then …") formulations that are reminiscent of case law. This gives them the appearance of cultic legislation. Moreover, all these ritual laws have a distinct hortatory style, owing to their presentation as divine speech, dictated by Yhwh to Moses from the top of Mount Sinai (Exod 24:15) and later from the newly constructed wilderness sanctuary (Lev 1:1, etc.) and, occasionally, simply "in the wilderness at Sinai" (Num 3:14; 9:1).[7]

Scholars agree that these ritual laws have a complex compositional history and were likely added to the Priestly narrative gradually, although they disagree as to how we should reconstruct the stages of this growth and the degree to which we can confidently reconstruct P's ritual sources.[8] For much of the twentieth century,

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[4] On the identification of the Priestly source in the Pentateuch and the ongoing debates that surround its precise scope, see Jakob Wöhrle, "The Priestly Writing(s): Scope and Nature," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Pentateuch*, eds. Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 255–75, with additional references.

[5] On the small number of rituals that take place outside the tent of meeting, see Hananel Shapira, "Rituals Conducted outside the Tabernacle in the Priestly Literature in the Pentateuch" (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2023 [Hebrew]).

[6] See further Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder, "Purity and Pollution in the Hebrew Bible: The State of the Discussion and Future Perspectives," in *Purity in Ancient Judaism: Text, Contexts, and Concepts*, eds. Lutz Doering, Jörg Frey, and Laura von Bartenwerffer, WUNT 528 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025), 13–59, here 20–21.

[7] Occasionally, Yhwh addresses Aaron directly; see Lev 10:8–11. The only Priestly ritual instructions that precede the arrival at Sinai are the Passover regulations found in Exod 12:1–20. On these materials and their history of composition, see Jan A. Wagenaar, *Origin and Transformation of the Ancient Israelite Festival Calendar*, BZABR 6 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 90–96.

[8] For a recent reconstruction of the compositional history of the ritual

pentateuchal scholars focused on establishing the original genre of P's sources on the basis of their distinctive syntactical features, especially their use of short verbal sentences, and by observing their formal similarities to other Near Eastern ritual sources. Rolf Rendtorff and Klaus Koch, for example, argued that the Priestly sacrificial instructions in Lev 1–7 likely originated in brief oral instructions that were used to inform lay participants about how to present sacrificial offerings.[9] Baruch Levine, by contrast, insisted that comparative evidence from Ugarit, Hatti, and Mesopotamia revealed that the Priestly ritual texts originated, not in oral recitation, but in archival records of offerings. From these archives, a "descriptive ritual" genre developed that primarily served to provide instruction manuals for priests and other ritual participants.[10]

Such form-critical analyses enriched the study of P in two ways: first, by highlighting the distinctive syntactical features that characterize many of these materials; and second, by uncovering several features they share in common with other ritual texts from the wider Near East. Yet form-critical studies have been criticized for their speculative nature and rigid approach to identifying the formal trademarks of ritual genres in P and the ancient Near East more broadly.[11] Moreover, form critics were only able to extract the ritual genres behind the Priestly laws because they treated as secondary all the literary features that were particularly distinctive to the Priestly ritual materials, such as their styling as divine law, their setting at the wilderness sanctuary, and their focus on the ritual agency of Aaron and his sons. Yet, such reconstructions of P's pre-history have been rightly

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texts of the tabernacle account in Exodus and the priestly ordination rituals in Leviticus, see Nathan MacDonald, *The Making of the Tabernacle and the Construction of Priestly Hegemony*, The Bible and the Humanities (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); on the various ritual texts of Leviticus, see Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus*, FAT II 25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); on the ritual texts of Numbers, see Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch*, BZABR 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 443–628.

[9] Rolf Rendtorff, *Studien zur Geschichte des Opfers im alten Israel*, WMANT 24 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1967); Klaus Koch, *Die Priesterschrift: Von Exodus 25 bis Leviticus 16. Eine überlieferungsgeschichtliche und literarkritische Untersuchung*, FRLANT 71 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959).

[10] Baruch A. Levine, "The Descriptive Tabernacle Texts of the Pentateuch," *JAOS* 85.3 (1965): 307–18; see also, Anson F. Rainey, "The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts," *Bib* 51.4 (1970): 485–98.

[11] For detailed critiques, see, e.g., James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 37–62; Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 215–19; Yitzhaq Feder, "Pentateuchal and Ancient Near Eastern Ritual," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Pentateuch*, eds. Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 421–42, here 439–42.

critiqued as unconvincing from a literary-critical perspective.[12] The Priestly rituals have been so thoroughly integrated into the larger Priestly narrative that it is virtually impossible to extract earlier ritual forms from the text of P as it now stands.[13] Hence, while scholars still agree that the Priestly authors probably drew on earlier ritual materials when composing their ritual instructions, they focus less on reconstructing the hypothetical ritual genres of P's prehistory than on analyzing the textualized rituals as they appear within the Priestly narrative itself.[14]

As mentioned, many scholars suspect that the decision to integrate such a large swathe of ritual instructions into the Priestly narrative reflects the historical pressures facing the Jerusalem priesthood after the Babylonian conquest and the ensuing struggle to rebuild the Jerusalem temple in the early Persian period—a convoluted compositional process that likely spanned the sixth through fourth centuries BCE.[15] In his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel,* Julius Wellhausen proposed that the Priestly authors integrated ritual into their narrative of origins because they were concerned to preserve the traditional rites of the Jerusalem temple after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562) in 587/586.[16] "[T]he practice of past times," Wellhausen reasoned, "had to be written down if it was not

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[12] For a demonstration of their various flaws, see Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 198–207.

[13] On the literary qualities of the Priestly ritual texts, see, e.g., Bryan D. Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds in the Book of Leviticus*, LHBOTS 480 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009) and Liane M. Feldman, *The Story of Sacrifice: Ritual and Narrative in the Priestly Source*, FAT 141 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

[14] Earlier ritual sources are still often identified in the sacrificial instructions of Lev 1–3, whose focus on the sequence of sacrificial action is often compared to ritual check lists from Ugarit. Moreover, the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 have a literary parallel in Deuteronomy 14, which may suggest the existence of a shared source. On Lev 1–3, see Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 218–19; on Lev 11, see Peter Altmann, "Traditions and Texts: The 'Origins' of the Dietary Prohibitions of Lev 11 and Deut 14," in Peter Altmann and Anna Angelini, *To Eat or Not to Eat: Studies on the Biblical Dietary Laws*, Archaeology and Bible 9 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024), 43–65.

[15] See, among various others, Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, trans. John Bowden, OTL (London: SCM, 1994), 2:482–93; Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 383–94; James W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 104–19; Julia Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult: The Holiness Legislation in Leviticus 17–26*, FAT 134 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 166–89; Yitzhaq Feder, "The Textualization of Priestly Ritual in Light of Hittite Sources," in *Text and Ritual in the Pentateuch: A Systematic and Comparative Approach*, eds. Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 121–50, with some qualifications (on these, see further the discussion below).

[16] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, trans. John Sutherland and Allan Menzies (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 404. Unless otherwise stated, all dates are BCE.

to be lost," thereby inspiring a large-scale process of ritual textualization.[17] This argument—that P originated during the exile and grew during the Persian period—continues to enjoy widespread support, although many scholars now embrace a more complex view of the relationship between the Priestly ritual texts and actual ritual practice; namely, that P did not simply codify traditional rites, but actively fashioned a ritual ideal that served to bolster the authority of its priestly elites as they sought to reestablish the Jerusalem temple cult and to promote ritual cooperation across the few Yahwistic cultic centers that were left operating by the Persian period.[18]

Such theories about the history of ritual textualization in P, however, face criticism from an important minority of scholars. For instance, Benjamin Sommer has argued forcefully that the attempt to date the Priestly texts by relating their cultic interests to the pressures of the exilic and post-exilic periods amounts to "pseudo-historicism," owing to the fundamental "lack of a control" with which scholars might prove that such interests necessarily stem from the sixth–fourth centuries and not the centuries before.[19] It is always possible, Sommer remarks, "that an author of one period came up with ideas that turned out to be particularly relevant at another period."[20] How can we be sure, then, that the ritual texts of P were not in fact penned in an earlier period for different reasons, and only later became a helpful means of addressing the challenges of the exile and temple rebuilding? Similar misgivings have been recently expressed by Liane Feldman, who argues that the attempt to relate the Priestly ritual materials to the historical realities of the sixth–fourth centuries typically overlooks the thoroughly literary character of these texts, which means that they resist easy identification with a particular time period or set of historical circumstances.[21] "Textualized ritual should be understood first and foremost as literature," Feldman argues, or what she terms "literary ritual."[22] The purpose of such literary rituals is not to codify actual ritual performance or to promote priestly hegemony in a time of crisis or rebuilding. They rather serve to create a story world that affirms the importance of sacrifice for ensuring the successful functioning of the cult and community established at Sinai.

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[17] Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 404.

[18] See esp. Watts, *Ritual*; Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult*, 166–88; Christian Frevel, "The Texture of Rituals in the Book of Numbers: A Fresh Approach to Ritual Density, the Role of Tradition, and the Emergence of Diversity in Early Judaism," in *Text and Ritual in the Pentateuch: A Systematic and Comparative Approach*, eds. Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 188–214.

[19] Sommer, "Pentateuch," here 85 and 94.

[20] Sommer, "Pentateuch," 85.

[21] See Liane Feldman, *The Consuming Fire: The Complete Priestly Source, from Creation to the Promised Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 45–52.

[22] Feldman, *Story of Sacrifice*, 15.

Sommer and Feldman are right to call for strong historical controls in the scholarly discussion of the textualization of ritual in P. Feldman also offers a valuable corrective to earlier interpretive approaches that assumed a direct equivalence between P's ritual texts and ritual practice in ancient Israel. Yet, the contention that ritual textualization in P effectively served only a literary purpose seems unnecessarily restrictive, given that even highly imaginative ritual sources were necessarily informed by the socio-historical conditions of their authors or editors and could be used to advance particular socio-political aims. We need, then, to enquire as to what might have inspired the Priestly authors to integrate such extensive ritual materials into their larger narrative of origins about the wilderness cult of the distant past. Moreover, Sommer and Feldman are arguably too negative in their assessment of the extant evidence for dating P and understanding the historical processes that may have informed the textualization of ritual in this literary source. In particular, comparative evidence may provide the kind of interpretive control that might prevent "pseudo-historicism" in the study of P. "Comparison," as the historian Chris Wickham notes, "is the closest that historians can get to testing, attempting to falsify, their own explanations."[23] Much can be gained, then, if we integrate the analysis of the Priestly ritual texts into a larger discussion about processes of ritual textualization in other Near Eastern settings, especially those processes that seem to have been related to instances of cultic disruption of the kind witnessed in Jerusalem in the sixth century, and beyond.

Certain studies have indeed sought to use comparative evidence to test the theory that ritual textualization in P was informed by events in Judah during the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. Most recently, Yitzhaq Feder has compared the Priestly ritual texts with the evidence of ritual textualization in Hittite sources from the Late Bronze age.[24] He argues that the Hittite ritual sources reveal a variety of scribal techniques that informed the textualization of ritual in the ancient world, from a concern to copy earlier ritual instructions or compile ritual collections, to the desire to introduce ritual variations or adjust traditional rites to new historical circumstances. The initial impetus for ritual textualization, Feder contends, was typically the need to create memory aids for ritual practitioners; however, several Hittite texts suggest that the writing of ritual was also a means of preserving rites for posterity in "periods of sociopolitical upheaval."[25] Notably, he cites the colophon of a Hittite festival text that explicitly states that the tablet was composed after the town of

[23] Chris Wickham, "Problems in Doing Comparative History," in *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: The Legacy of Timothy Reuter*, ed. Patricia Skinner, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 22 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 5–28, here 7.

[24] Feder, "Ritual"; id., "Textualization."

[25] Feder, "Ritual," 434.

Nerik was attacked by the Kaskians and the priests were asked to give a recitation of the regular festal rites after they fled the fighting.[26]

Feder further argues that this Hittite evidence adds important weight to the theory that the Priestly authors, while certainly drawing on earlier ritual sources from the pre-exilic period, were motivated to integrate such sources into their narrative because of the cultic upheavals of the exilic and post-exilic periods and the heightened need at that time to "preserve ritual traditions for posterity."[27] This historical setting would also explain some of the distinctive features of P that have no parallel in the Hittite sources, such as their level of detail, their framing as divine speech, and their extensive editing to remove textual variants and create a "homogenous and coherent" text that forms part of a larger imaginative narrative.[28] By the time the Priestly authors were editing and composing their ritual materials, Feder argues, the scribal concern was shifting away from recording actual practice to advancing a "literary, ideological, and socio religious agenda" that could promote the Jerusalem temple cult over potential rivals and create a central set of ritual regulations that possessed a heightened prestige and could thus marginalize cultic alternatives at a time of vulnerability for the Jerusalem priesthood.[29]

Feder's analysis shows the value of a comparative approach for the historical study of the textualization of ritual in P, but his case study of Hittite ritual texts remains quite far removed in time from the range of possible dates that scholars assign to the composition of P. His analysis also concerns a corpus of texts which, as Feder acknowledges, share certain formal features in common with P but few of the discursive or idealistic qualities that characterize the Priestly ritual materials. A much closer parallel for the textualization of ritual in P, we argue, can be found in another corpus of ancient Near Eastern ritual texts that stem from the first millennium; namely, the cuneiform temple ritual texts that form part of the Late Babylonian Priestly Literature.

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[26] KUB 28.80 (CTH 737) rev. iv 1'–11'; for transcription and translation, see W. J. I. Waal, "The Source as Object: Studies in Hittite Diplomatics" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2010), 293.

[27] Feder, "Ritual," 434.

[28] Feder, "Textualization," 146. On the textual stability of the Priestly ritual laws of Leviticus, see further Sarianna Metso, "Evidence from the Qumran Scrolls for the Scribal Transmission of Leviticus," in *Editing the Bible: Assessing the Task Past and Present*, eds. John S. Kloppenborg and Judith H. Newman, RBS 69 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 67–79.

[29] Feder, "Textualization," 146–47. It should be stressed that Feder does not suggest that the Priestly ritual laws were written wholesale in the Neo-Babylonian or Persian periods. He insists that the Priestly authors had at their disposal considerable ritual sources from the pre-exilic era, and thus that P is an important source for understanding ritual in the centuries prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Feder recognizes, however, the considerable difficulties that face scholars seeking to reconstruct the precise scope of these sources from the text of P as we now have it.

2 INTRODUCING THE LATE BABYLONIAN TEMPLE RITUAL TEXTS

The Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, which largely date to the fourth through second centuries, are cuneiform records outlining the procedures for rituals to be performed in Babylonian temples.[30] We can speak of two groups of such texts, with one serving the Bīt Rēš temple at Uruk and its patron deity Anu, and the other, Babylon's Esangil and Bēl-Marduk. Despite their distinct geographical and theological foci, these two textual groups share many features; and they are, indeed, commonly studied together.[31] For the purposes of our comparison with P, we will continue to treat the materials from Uruk and Babylon as related materials that can together be referred to as the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts.

The texts are formally diverse, with few indications of standardization or redaction.[32] They are written in the literary register of Standard Babylonian, but their orthography and lexicon are clearly influenced by the Late Babylonian dialect.[33] They are also defined by their distinct socio-historical settings; both the Urukean and the Babylonian temple ritual texts originated among Late Babylonian priestly communities and were stored in their respective temple libraries.[34]

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[30] For an overview of the known Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, see Céline Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings: The Babylonian New Year Festival in the Last Age of Cuneiform Culture*, CHANE 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 348–71; Marc J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practises*, CM 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2004); François Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels accadiens* (Paris: Leroux, 1921). "Late Babylonian" is used here to refer to the period 484–140, although the end date is arbitrarily based on the arrival of Parthian rule; it cannot be excluded that some of these texts were written after that date.

[31] There is no comprehensive study and publication of all the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, and much material remains unpublished. A comprehensive analysis, which will consider their distinct geographical origins, is in preparation by Debourse.

[32] Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 348–51. One exception may be the series with the emic title "Ancient Sumerian," which seems to be an attempt to group material together, although the logic remains unclear; see Céline Debourse and Uri Gabbay, "The Late Babylonian Series of 'Ancient Sumerian': Structure, Contents, and the Agency of Ritual Texts," *ZA* 114.1 (2024): 28–42.

[33] A particularly telling characteristic in this regard is their linguistic and orthographic affinity with astronomical texts. For a preliminary study of the linguistic profile of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, see Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 179–201.

[34] At Uruk, many of the temple ritual texts were found *in situ*, either in the temple library or in private libraries belonging to priestly families. For Babylon, this kind of archeological context is lacking, since the tablets came to Western museum collections by way of the antiquities market at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries CE. However, because tablets were looted and dispatched in bulk, scholars have been able to use "museum archeology" to reconstruct the collections that once likely

Most of these Late Babylonian temple ritual texts record annual festivals. They furthermore include occasional rituals, rituals of the daily cult, and calendar-like lists of temple rituals observed in a single month. Among the published ritual texts from Babylon are texts dealing with the New Year Festival that takes place at the beginning of the month Nisannu[35]; a Palm Festival celebrated in the ninth month Kislīmu[36]; a festival involving Ištar of Eturkalamma[37]; a festive procession of gods from Borsippa and Babylon to Kish[38]; a cultic calendar for the third month Simānu[39]; and a ritual procession through and around the Esangil complex.[40] From Uruk, ritual texts describe the so-called nocturnal fire festival;[41] an *akītu* for Anu celebrated in the seventh month Tašrītu; a festival for Ishtar; and the daily offerings of drinks, meat, and bread products to be brought in the temples of the city.[42] There are also several occasional rituals, such as the ritual for making a kettledrum,[43] the temple building ritual,[44] and the eclipse ritual.[45]

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belonged to the Esangil libraries. See Philippe Clancier, *Les bibliothèques en Babylonie dans la deuxième moitié du Ier millénaire av. J.-C.*, AOAT 363 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009) for a reconstruction of the libraries and archives of Late Achaemenid and Hellenistic Babylonia.

[35] Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*; Debourse and Gabbay, " 'Ancient Sumerian' "; Rocío Da Riva and Gianluca Galetti, "Two Temple Rituals from Babylon," *JCS* 70.1 (2018): 189–227.

[36] Galip Çağırgan and W. G. Lambert, "The Late Babylonian Kislīmu Ritual for Esagil," *JCS* 43–45.1 (1991–1993): 89–106.

[37] Rocío Da Riva, "The Angry Ištar of Eturkalamma: BM 32482+ and the Conservation of Cultic Traditions in the Late Babylonian Period," *Iraq* 81 (2019): 87–105; Céline Debourse, "Late Babylonian Temple Ritual Texts with Cultic Commentaries: Aspects of Form and Function," *WZKM* 112 (2022): 347–65.

[38] Andrew R. George, "Four Temple Rituals from Babylon," in *Wisdom, Gods, and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert*, eds. I. L. Finkel and A. R. George (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 259–99, here 289–99.

[39] George, "Four Temple Rituals," 270–80.

[40] Rocío Da Riva, "In and Around the Court of Bēl and the Cultic Topography of the Esagil According to Late Babylonian Ritual Texts," in *Individuals and Institutions in the Ancient Near East: A Tribute to Ran Zadok*, eds. Uri Gabbay and Shai Gordin, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 27 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 179–214.

[41] Julia Krul, *The Revival of the Anu Cult and the Nocturnal Fire Ceremony at Late Babylonian Uruk*, CHANE 95 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

[42] Linssen, *Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, 172–244.

[43] Uri Gabbay, "Drums, Hearts, Bulls, and Dead Gods: The Theology of the Ancient Mesopotamian Kettledrum," *JANER* 18.1 (2018): 1–47.

[44] Claus Ambos, *Mesopotamische Baurituale aus dem 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr* (Dresden: ISLET, 2004).

[45] David Brown and Marc J. H. Linssen, "BM 134701=1965-10-14,1 and the Hellenistic Period Eclipse Ritual From Uruk," *RA* 91.2 (2007): 147–66.

Many (but not all) of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts refer to rituals that are mentioned in earlier sources. They therefore do not seem to invent all the rituals but rather develop rites that were well-known at the time. For example, the New Year Festival is well-attested in earlier sources like royal inscriptions, while other rites, such as the eclipse ritual, are known from letters and administrative texts.[46] Yet, crucially, most of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts have no direct textual precursor. They are rather known from a single Late Babylonian exemplar. Moreover, many of the referenced rites include new elements that have no direct correlate in earlier ritual attestations, the most famous example being the slapping of the king in the New Year Festival texts.[47] Despite this evidence of innovation, Assyriologists long assumed that the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts were simply copies of older compositions.[48] In turn, they commonly treated the texts as if they were "expressly practical texts that record cultic events prescriptively."[49] In other words, the ritual texts were often seen as being exclusively prescriptive, outlining the rules for ritual performance according to a long "stream of tradition."[50] The implied understanding was that, as ritual handbooks, these texts provide unmediated access to the reality of Late Babylonian temple worship at Uruk and Babylon; additionally, scholars assumed that this worship remained unchanged for centuries, and thus remained largely unaffected by the arrival of foreign imperial rule in

[46] For an overview of first millennium sources dealing with the New Year Festival, see Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 36–89; for the eclipse ritual, see Kristin Kleber, "Eight Neo-Babylonian Texts with the *hīṭu*-Clause from the Eanna Archive (nos. 5–12)," in *Fault, Responsibility, and Administrative Law in Late Babylonian Legal Texts*, eds. F. Rachel Magdalene, Bruce Wells, and Cornelia Wunsch (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2019), 355–77; Paul-Alain Beaulieu and John P. Britton, "Rituals for an Eclipse Possibility in the 8th Year of Cyrus," *JCS* 46.1 (1994): 73–86.

[47] Céline Debourse, "Debita Reverentia: Understanding Royal Humiliation in the New Year's Festival Texts," *Kaskal* 16 (2019): 183–200.

[48] See, explicitly, Linssen, *Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, 167–68. A critical reflection on this Assyriological tendency to disconnect texts from their historical setting can be found in Céline Debourse, "Text in Context: Priestly Writings in the Bible and Babylonia," in *Jehu's Tribute: What Can Biblical Studies Offer Assyriology?*, eds. Jeff L. Cooley and Rannfrid I. L. Thelle (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2025), 99–114.

[49] Andrew R. George, "Review of Marc J. H. Linssen: The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice (Cuneiform Monographs, 25.) xvi, 343 pp. Leiden and Boston: Brill Styx, 2004," *BSOAS* 70.1 (2007): 155–56, here 155.

[50] Assyriologists use the term "stream of tradition" to refer to the body of cuneiform texts that were copied and studied throughout the first millennium; see Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-Millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (London: UCL Press, 2019), 26–30 for a critical evaluation of the concept.

the Persian and Hellenistic periods and the pressures this put on the priestly elites within those cities.[51]

More recently, however, Assyriologists have begun to view the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts as intentional compositions of the late first millennium, and to consider them as part of a broader literary trend in cuneiform writing known as the Late Babylonian Priestly Literature (LBPL).[52] In contrast to P, the LBPL does not form a continuous narrative, but instead consists of a variety of compositions recorded on individual cuneiform tablets. It presents a clear Late Babylonian literary *trend*, rather than a well-defined corpus. The term "literature" in the denominator "LBPL" is used in its

[51] An alternative view is that of Da Riva, "Angry Ištar"; id., "In and Around," who claims that these texts were not prescriptive, but rather descriptive. According to her, they functioned as administrative documents, with scribes witnessing a ritual performance and writing down what occured in front of them "for the purpose of recording" (Da Riva, "In and Around," 210–11). The texts are, in this view, not truly to be studied as texts or artefacts, but as rituals. The aim of recording these rituals, according to this idea, has inherently practical motivations and serves to safeguard correct observance and preserve the rituals for later generations. In this sense, Da Riva's interpretation is similar to that of scholars who view the temple ritual texts as prescriptive, because it shares the common assumption that they accurately reflect ritual performance.

[52] Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*; Krul, *Revival*. The recognition and study of the LBPL represents a recent turn in Assyriology, one which remains in its infancy and requires further investigation. In general, it represents a shift away from the field's traditional views on cuneiform literary production during the first millennium, which tend to emphasize longevity and continuity, towards more historical, contextualized readings of individual texts. For an outline of what constitutes the LBPL, see the description and textual references in Michael Jursa and Céline Debourse, "Late Babylonian Priestly Literature from Babylon," in *Stones, Tablets, and Scrolls: Periods of the Formation of the Bible*, eds. Peter Dubovský and Federico Giuntoli, Archaeology and Bible 3 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 253–81; see also Michael Jursa and Céline Debourse, "A Babylonian Priestly Martyr, a King-like Priest, and the Nature of Late Babylonian Priestly Literature," *WZKM* 107 (2017): 77–98; Céline Debourse and Michael Jursa, "Priestly Resistance and Royal Penitence: A New Reading of the Amīl-Marduk Epic (BM 34113)," *WZKM* 109 (2019): 171–82; Michael Jursa, "Wooing the Victor with Words: Babylonian Priestly Literature as a Response to Macedonian Conquest," in *The Legitimation of Conquest: Monarchical Representation and the Art of Government in the Empire of Alexander the Great*, eds. Kai Trampedach and Alexander Meeus, Studies in Ancient Monarchies 7 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020), 165–78; Geert De Breucker, "Heroes and Sinners: Babylonian Kings in Cuneiform Historiography of the Persian and Hellenistic Period," in *Political Memory in and after the Persian Empire*, eds. Jason M. Silverman and Caroline Waerzeggers, ANEM 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 75–94; Caroline Waerzeggers, "Facts, Propaganda, or History? Shaping Political Memory in the Nabonidus Chronicle," in *Political Memory in and after the Persian Empire*, eds. Jason M. Silverman and Caroline Waerzeggers, ANEM 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 95–124.

broadest Assyriological sense; namely, to refer to writings that were not about daily life, such as administrative records, legal texts, or letters, but rather were concerned with scholarship, religion, and literary works (in the narrow sense). Aside from ritual texts, the LBPL includes historical narrative texts concerned with a semi-imagined past and (pseudo)-prophecies focused on an idealized future.[53]

The compositions belonging to the LBPL can be distinguished from earlier cuneiform textual traditions by their formal characteristics such as paleography, the material qualities of the tablets on which the texts are inscribed, and their language, which anchor them firmly in a delimited historical setting; namely, they are the product of priestly communities in Uruk and Babylon during the Late Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods (ca. 400–140). The LBPL can be termed "priestly" not only because the compositions were created by priests working within temple settings, but also because they are concerned especially with priestly matters. Their strong interest in priestly agency and prominence distinguishes this Late Babylonian oeuvre most markedly from the cuneiform stream of tradition of previous centuries.[54] As part of the LBPL, then, the temple ritual texts from Uruk and Babylon are best understood in light of this broader trend of priestly writings during the final centuries of cuneiform culture.

3 DISTINCTIVE DISCURSIVE FEATURES OF THE PRIESTLY RITUAL TEXTS AND THE LBPL

Any comparison of the Priestly ritual materials and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts must begin by acknowledging that these two sets of materials have key differences that reflect their distinctive religious outlooks and particular ritual interests. The Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, for instance, deal with a polytheistic cult, which means that they are more diverse not only in terms of the number of deities they mention, but also the number of temples in which they situate ritual performance. The main temples of Uruk and Babylon (the Bīt Rēš and Esangil respectively) figure most prominently in these texts, but several other sanctuaries are mentioned, such as the Irigal of Nanāya and Ištar in Uruk or the Eturkalamma of Ištar of Babylon. These temples, meanwhile, correspond to known historical sanctuaries, as opposed to an imaginary shrine of the distant past (as is the case in P). Furthermore, even though the Late Babylonian temple texts have a literary quality, they do not evince the same level of narrative embeddedness as the Priestly ritual texts. They also are not united to form a single compositional unit, but remain on discrete

[53] Jursa and Debourse, "Late Babylonian Priestly Literature"; Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 399–403.

[54] It is perhaps best to describe the LBPL as a late "branch" of cuneiform literature; indeed, these texts remain strongly rooted in an existing cuneiform literary tradition, while also displaying strong formal and discursive differences vis-à-vis that tradition.

tablets located in two temples. The Late Babylonian temple texts also lack the hortatory style of P's divine speeches, as well as P's preference for casuistic formulations that cast all the ritual materials as cultic legislation. Yet, while these differences between the Priestly ritual materials and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts are considerable, they do not negate the importance of several remarkable features they share in common.

3.1 Emphasis on Priestly Hegemony

An initial and noteworthy similarity is the manner in which both sets of materials emphasize priestly hegemony—a discursive interest that strongly affects the way they each describe ritual performance. In the case of P, we have already observed that all of the ritual texts are integrated into an imaginative narrative that emphasizes the deity's choice to inhabit a tent sanctuary in the wilderness with a single family of priests in attendance. All the ritual texts presuppose this setting and affirm the cultic importance of Aaron and his sons. In sacrificial matters, the Israelites are consistently required to defer to the Aaronide priests and to diligently follow the deity's set allocations for priestly prebends. This deferential attitude, it must be said, does not exclude non-priestly Israelites from exercising their own ritual agency. Leviticus 1:3–6, for instance, permit the Israelites to slaughter and skin their own livestock when presenting whole burnt offerings.[55] Nonetheless, the burnt-offering instructions make clear that the Israelites must recognize the Aaronide priests' exclusive rights to ritually manipulate the animal's blood and arrange its various parts upon the altar.[56] The rules for the grain offering in Lev 2 likewise explain that, while the Israelites are permitted to pour oil and frankincense on their offering, they must then bring it to the priests, who are to burn a portion on the altar and then keep what remains as a prebend. The Priestly sacrificial texts thus construct a careful ritual hierarchy in which non-priestly Israelites are afforded knowledge and responsibility for certain parts of the ritual procedure, but the priests have a superior form of "ritual mastery" that allows them to officiate at the altar and ensure the efficacy of the sacrifice.[57]

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the Priestly purity regulations of Lev 11–16.[58] The Israelites are given instructions for

[55] Note, however, that this task is transferred to the priests in the LXX. On the transmission history of Lev 1:3–5a and reception history of the law, see Julia Rhyder, "The Reception of Ritual Laws in the Early Second Temple Period: Evidence from Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles," in *Text and Ritual in the Pentateuch: A Systematic and Comparative Approach*, eds. Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 255–79, here 270–72.

[56] See Lev 1:7–9.

[57] Direct quote Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 141.

[58] On these aspects of the purity regulations, see Nihan and Rhyder, "Purity and Pollution," 47–48.

performing basic pollution rituals at home without priestly involvement, such as washing clothes and ritual bathing.[59] They are also taught how to evaluate if bodily pollutions, such as morbid discharges, present a risk of impurity.[60] Nonetheless, the gravest cases of pollution remain matters in which priestly intervention is required. This is especially clear from the rituals for treating *ṣāraʿat* "skin disease" in Lev 13–14, which the deity does not require Aaron and Moses to communicate to the rest of the community but rather treats as expert priestly knowledge.[61] In Lev 10:10, meanwhile, the priests are charged with the task of separating "between the holy and the common, and between the pure and the impure," which again affirms their status as the chief agents responsible for handling pollution within the community. Finally, the central importance of priestly agency is strongly displayed during the ritual procedure outlined in Lev 16, which requires the high priest to ritually purge the sanctuary and its paraphernalia from the impurities of the people and priests.[62] This ritual, which involves the dangerous rite of entering the inner sanctum, provides dramatic illustration of the high priest's unique role in mitigating pollution to ensure that the deity can remain in his sanctuary.

As mentioned, the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts are also part of a broader oeuvre of priestly writings that have a distinctive focus on defining priesthood and establishing priestly authority—an interest that is markedly different from earlier textual traditions from Mesopotamia that typically show little interest in affirming the authority of priestly agents. In contrast to ritual texts in P, the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts are not embedded in a broader coherent narrative. Nonetheless, clear intertextual connections can be observed between the temple ritual texts and the historical narratives that are part of the LBPL, such that it is warranted to study the Late Babylon temple ritual texts as part of this larger priestly oeuvre. For example, ritual is narrativized in the so-called Adad-šumu-uṣur Epic, which depicts the newly crowned Adad-šumu-uṣur kneeling and praying before the god Marduk to repent for his sins, upon which the god confirms his rule.[63] The epic thus presents a ritual setting very similar to that which is famously known from the ritual texts for the New Year Festival, which describe the ritual humiliation of the king leading to his relegitimization.[64] In turn, historical narrative is sometimes integrated into the ritual texts, quite directly in the case

[59] See, e.g., Lev 15:4–11.

[60] See, e.g., Lev 15:2–3.

[61] On this aspect of the purity laws of Lev 12–15, and how it differs from other Levantine ritual texts about skin disease that typically involved non-priestly agents (such as healers), see further Yitzhaq Feder, *Purity and Pollution in the Hebrew Bible: From Embodied Experience to Moral Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 78–90.

[62] See Lev 16:2b–3.

[63] De Breucker, "Heroes and Sinners."

[64] Debourse, "Debita Reverentia," 183–200.

of the ritual calendar of the month Simānu, which includes a prayer retelling the attack of an Elamite enemy on Babylonian temples.[65] Elamite invasions are a ubiquitous topic in the historical narratives of the LBPL, as can be clearly seen, for example, in one of the so-called Kedorlaomer texts in which the Elamite king attempts to sack the temple in Nippur.[66] Hence, the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts are intertextually intertwined with the rest of the LBPL.

The focus on priests in the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts arguably goes beyond what we witness in P, given that these materials show little interest in the wider community but instead focus entirely on priestly actors.[67] One particular concern seems to be the definition of priesthood and whom it should include (and conversely, exclude). Unlike in P, where one family of priests is in charge, a wide variety of priests appear in every Late Babylonian temple ritual text, including several that bear titles that are unattested before the Hellenistic period.[68] These texts seem to be less concerned with outlining the specific tasks and hierarchical relationships of these different priestly agents than with affirming the boundaries around the priesthood as a whole. In other words, the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts affirm who is allowed to participate in the worship of the gods in Babylonia's temples and who is excluded. Still, within the priestly community as portrayed in the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, one priest stands out: the Elder Brother (*aḫurabû*) or high priest.[69] He figures as the epitome of priestly identity and authority, not only in his function as ritual performer, but also as the one who holds the required knowledge about ritual.[70]

The prominence of this priest is made explicit in the so-called Eulogy of the Elder Brother, a composition from Babylon in which the god Bēl addresses the high priest with lofty praise[71]: "Your name

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[65] George, "Four Temple Rituals," 270–80.

[66] Jursa and Debourse, "Nature of Late Babylonian Priestly Literature"; Frances Reynolds, *A Babylon Calendar Treatise: Scholars and Invaders in the Late First Millennium BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[67] An exception can be found in the nocturnal fire ceremony at Uruk, in which Urukeans are described as kindling fires in the streets of the city; see Krul, *Revival*, 115–18. On the interest these materials take in priestly prominence, see Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 356–62; Uri Gabbay, "How Should We Read Ancient Mesopotamian Ritual Texts?", in *Rituals, Memory and Societal Dynamics: Contributions to Social Archaeology. A Collection of Essays in Memory of Sharon Zuckerman*, eds. Gideon Shelach-Lavi, Joseph Maran, and Uri Davidovich, LEMA 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

[68] On new priestly titles for women in the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, see Céline Debourse, "Women in Cultic Functions in Late Achaemenid and Hellenistic Babylon," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in the Ancient Near East*, eds. Shawna Dolansky and Sarah Shectman (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), 147–57.

[69] Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 222–28.

[70] For the Elder Brother, see also Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 204–18.

[71] Andrew R. George, "Cuneiform Texts from the Folios of W. G.

shall be Elder Brother of E-umuša. You shall be privy to my secrets, my written lore shall be known to you, you shall be privy to my rites. I hereby determine for you a great destiny: perform (the duty) by day and night! The king shall greet you with pious respect."[72] The Eulogy reveals how the Elder Brother was in a unique relationship with the supreme deity (Bēl at Babylon, Anu at Uruk), who chose him and confirmed his authority. The novelty of this Eulogy is especially evident if we compare it to another unique cuneiform document, namely an eighth century legal document recorded on a *kudurru* (i.e., a stone monument) that deals with the transfer of prebendary rights to a priest by the deities Nanāya and Mār-bīti.[73] Usually, we would expect the king to be the bestower of these priestly rights and duties,[74] but in the *kudurru* two deities take up that role. The absence of the king from this ordination ritual suggests that cuneiform texts from previous centuries could, on occasion, downplay the importance of royal ritual agency in ritual and instead stress the role of the gods in choosing their priestly agents. Nonetheless, this does not amount to a comparable interest in priestly ritual power to that found in Late Babylonian ritual materials such as the Eulogy of the Elder Brother. While the *kudurru* presents the ordination of the priest as the result of divine intervention, it is otherwise indistinguishable from other contracts stipulating the transfer of prebendary rights. The Eulogy found in the LBPL, by contrast, is a unique type of text, both in form and in content. It describes the Elder Brother in no uncertain language as someone who was divinely chosen to fulfil the task of upholding the worship of the gods, explicitly granting him a status that is usually reserved for kings alone.[75] Moreover, unlike the eighth century *kudurru*, which is a stand-alone instance of divine intervention in priestly ordination, the Eulogy is part of a broader literary trend within Late Babylonian ritual texts that consistently foregrounds priests and their unique relationship to the Babylonian gods.

Indeed, a similar conceptualization of this priest's exceptional status can be observed in one of the prayers found in the New Year

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Lambert, Part Two," *NABU* 2021.4 (2021): 271–72; Jursa and Debourse, "Babylonian Priestly Martyr."

[72] George, "Folios Part Two," 271. The Eulogy remains unparalleled in cuneiform literature, with words usually reserved for revering deities or kings put in the mouth of Bēl for exalting the Elder Brother; see also Jursa and Debourse, "Babylonian Priestly Martyr," 89–94.

[73] VS 1 36; François Thureau-Dangin, "Un acte de donation de Marduk-zākir-šumi," *RA* 16.3 (1919): 117–56, here 141–144. We thank one of the peer reviewers at *JHS* for referring us to this text.

[74] Caroline Waerzeggers and Michael Jursa, "On the Initiation of Babylonian Priests," *ZABR* 14 (2008): 1–38.

[75] On the traditional Babylonian view of the divine origin of the king's task to uphold the cult, see Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Pious King: Royal Patronage of Temples," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 725–51, here 730–31.

Festival texts, where the Elder Brother, in his address to the god Bēl, explicitly identifies himself as the speaker, saying: "I am the Elder Brother of Eumuša,[76] who speaks favorably of you."[77] The prayer thus becomes a personal interaction between the priest and the god whose blessing he requests, rather than the general call for divine favor that we would expect in the context of a New Year Festival. The New Year Festival texts further emphasize the prominence of the Elder Brother by repeatedly stressing the importance of his purity for the success of the ritual. When describing the purification of certain parts of the temple, the text states that "the Elder Brother of Eumuša may not see the consecration of the temple. If he sees it, he will be impure."[78] Many other Late Babylonian temple ritual texts show a similar concern to affirm the central role of the Elder Brother in ensuring the success of the ritual action being undertaken, thus affirming the general interest in priestly hegemony that is characteristic of the LBPL.[79]

More generally, these texts present the priests as the exclusive performers of temple worship, or vice-versa, it depicts temple worship as sustained by the priesthood exclusively. The Eulogy seems to attribute this to the priests' status as having been chosen by the gods; this is perhaps also expressed by the description of the priesthood as *ṣābē kidinni*, a term reinvented at this time to refer to the divine protection under which the priesthood falls.[80] This priestly prominence contrasts starkly with more traditional Babylonian views, which, as mentioned, tend to present the king as the one chosen to uphold the worship of the gods.[81] In the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, however, the figure of the king is almost completely absent, and rituals are the responsibility of priests alone.

3.2 Sidelining the King

This brings us to a second point of similarity between the ritual texts in P and those of the LBPL: namely, their tendency to omit the person of the king or downplay the role of royal authority in ritual. In the case of P, the absence of a king from the ritual texts may initially seem unsurprising, given that the Priestly narrative is set in an imagined period of Israel's history that predates the establishment of the monarchy. Yet P's decision not even to mention a possible royal ruler in the future is highly unusual, given the importance of royal

[76] Eumuša is the name of the cella of Bēl in his temple Esagil.

[77] NYF3 i 11'; Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 128–29.

[78] NYF4 iv 21–22; Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 150–51.

[79] See also Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 222–28.

[80] The term cannot be translated directly; for the argument for its later reuse and reinterpretation, see Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 323–27. On the priests' unique relationship to the gods as outlined in the broader LBPL, see also Jursa and Debourse, "Late Babylonian Priestly Literature," here 269–77.

[81] Waerzeggers, "Pious King," 725–51.

leaders in other biblical accounts of sanctuary construction and ritual performance, such as 1 Kgs 5–8; 2 Kgs 22–23; and even Ezek 40–48.[82]

The omission of the king requires P to creatively reassign the ritual roles that a royal figure would typically have assumed in the establishment of a new sanctuary cult to other members of the community.[83] Moses, for instance, assumes functions that were traditionally performed by kings, such as receiving Yhwh's inspiration for building the sanctuary, coordinating the building works, commissioning the laborers, and then ceremonially installing the vessels within the sanctuary and overseeing its dedication (Lev 8–9). The high priest, meanwhile, is responsible for offering the first sacrifices and serving as intermediary between the divinity and the community (Lev 9:7–21). He is also adorned with certain sacred garments that are reminiscent of royal figures, most notably his diadem, which is said to ensure that the Israelites' sacred donations are free of any ritual "wrong" and might ensure "their favor before Yhwh."[84] Finally, the Israelite community is granted the traditional royal role of resourcing the cult and protecting it from malpractice—a role which requires them to internalize the deity's various ritual requirements and to serve as chief cultic sponsors who must not only bring all the materials required for constructing the shrine, but also supply the livestock, cereals, and spices to the sanctuary for its continued sacrificial operations.[85] The Priestly instructions thus present a creative reinterpretation of ritual action that makes a royal figure unnecessary, not only for establishing a new sanctuary cult, but also for ensuring its ongoing maintenance.

The rituals described in the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts share a similar concern to reimagine royal ritual agency. The king is completely absent from the majority of these texts. Indeed, it is the ubiquitousness of this absent to minimal royal role that makes these

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[82] P also does, on occasion, refer to rituals to be performed only in the imagined future in the land. See, e.g., Lev 14:34, which admits that houses are not part of the wilderness landscape, and so must instead speak of rites that will be performed when the Israelites will have settled in "the land of Canaan" and begun to build homes. So, too, do certain laws of the Holiness legislation, such as Lev 25, apply only to when the Israelites have entered the land. It would thus have been entirely possible for the Priestly authors to refer to the role that a monarch was to play in the cult in the land, without necessarily violating their narrative principles.

[83] See further the detailed discussion at Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult*, 129–36.

[84] Exod 28:38; on this aspect of the diadem, see Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder, "Aaron's Vestments in Exodus 28 and Priestly Leadership," in *Debating Authority: Concepts of Leadership in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets*, eds. Katharina Pyschny and Sarah Schulz, BZAW 507 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 45–67, here 59–61.

[85] On this aspect, see further Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult*, 148–52; MacDonald, *Making of the Tabernacle*, 153–83.

texts particularly remarkable. While earlier cuneiform tradition includes some examples of individual ritual texts that do not mention kings when their presence might be expected, royal agency was never so consistently downplayed as in the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts.[86] This royal absence might not be surprising in the rituals of the daily cult observed in the inner temple, where royal participation in the form of the king's presence was generally limited.[87] Yet the lack of royal presence in the description of large-scale festivals performed in the public sphere is especially significant.[88] For example, in the so-called nocturnal fire ceremony at Uruk, a fire symbolically moves from atop the temple tower through the temples and streets of the town to the city walls and gates, tying Urukean society together under Anu and his priests. It is striking that the king, unmentioned in the text, is absent from that system.[89] Meanwhile, the king is mentioned in a ritual text that describes the *akītu* festival of Anu taking place in the seventh month Tašrītu, but the document seems to have little interest in him as a ritual agent.[90] This is particularly noteworthy, given that the *akītu* festival is traditionally known as a royal ritual.[91] In this Hellenistic Urukean text, by contrast, the ritual does not celebrate kingship at all. Instead, it allocates a passive role to the person of the king and focuses on priestly agency and the priests' relationship with the divine.

This eclipse of kings by priests is heightened in the New Year Festival texts from Babylon.[92] One ritual episode in particular develops the tenets of the triangular relationship between god, priest, and king. This is the so-called "Humiliation and Negative Confession of

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[86] For example, the ritual text published in Rylke Borger, "Die Weihe eines Enlil-Priesters," *BiOr* 30 (1973): 163–76, is concerned with the purification (possibly at the moment of ordination) of a ***pašīšu*** priest, but does not mention the king, even though the latter was presumably involved in the process of ordination (see also above).

[87] Traditionally the king was involved in the daily cult in many ways, but not by participation; see Waerzeggers, "Pious King," 733–37.

[88] Note, moreover, that this absence is corroborated by the historical evidence; see, e.g., Céline Debourse, "The New Year Festival in Seleucid Babylon: A Historical Assessment," in *Ceremonies, Feasts and Festivities in Ancient Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean World. Performance and Participation. Proceedings of the 11th Melammu Workshop, Barcelona, 29–31 January 2020*, eds. Rocío Da Riva, Ana Arroyo and Céline Debourse, Melammu Workshops and Monographs 7 (Münster: Zaphon, 2022), 85–114.

[89] Krul, *Revival*, 112–18; Céline Debourse, "Review of Julia Krul: The Revival of the Anu Cult and the Nocturnal Fire Ceremony at Late Babylonian Uruk (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 95). 310 pp. Leiden: Brill, 2018," *WZKM* 109 (2019): 354–57.

[90] Linssen, *Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, 184–91.

[91] Julye Bidmead, *The Akitu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia*, Gorgias Dissertations Near Eastern Studies 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2002).

[92] For a detailed treatment of this corpus, see Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*.

the King," which describes how the king enters the temple where the high priest removes his regalia and proceeds to slap him in the face. The king is then made to pronounce a "negative confession," after which the priest, in accordance with the will of the god Bēl, reinstates him into his office.[93] In this episode, the king is a passive, humiliated figure, whereas the high priest appears to have supraroyal qualities and to act in close accordance with the divine. The ritual slapping of the king thus presents an effective ritual legitimation for priestly roles in absence of native kingship (see further below).[94]

3.3 IDEALIZED RITUAL

It is hard to imagine that any Hellenistic king was ever slapped in the face by a Babylonian priest; nothing in the historical or textual evidence in the cuneiform record suggests that such an act ever took place.[95] Rather, the Late Babylonian New Year Festival texts appear to outline a ritual ideal that lives separately from ritual reality, and expresses the ideal religio-political hierarchy that the authors of this text sought to promote. This is a further important aspect of commonality between the ritual texts of the LBPL and those of P; namely, their tendency to present ritual in an idealized way that both resembles rituals as they were performed but also moves well beyond what could be actualized in reality in a bid to affirm specific ritual hierarchies.

In the case of P, the entire set of ritual instructions is infused with an idealized quality on account of the setting at the wilderness at Sinai and the repeated references to the foundational figures of Moses and Aaron. These imaginative elements are far from incidental to the ritual instructions. They are mentioned frequently in the deity's commands to the community about how they ought to perform the rites; the Israelites are regularly instructed, for instance, to bring their animals to the ***peṯaḥ ʾōhel môʿēḏ*** "entrance of the tent of meeting," to defer to ***ʿahªrōn ûḇānāyw*** "Aaron and his sons" when bringing sacrifices to the shrine, and to move ***bammaḥªnê*** "inside the camp" and ***miḥûṣ*** "outside" it. This decision to embed the Priestly rituals so firmly into this ideal world means that, even if the ancient readers or hearers of the Priestly narrative could partially reproduce the Priestly rituals in their own context, they would never be able to perform them precisely as the text prescribed.[96]

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[93] Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 277–86; id., "Debita Reverentia."

[94] See also Jonathan Z. Smith, "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams: A Study in Situational Incongruity," *HR* 16.1 (1976): 1–19.

[95] For a detailed treatment of this issue, see Debourse, "Debita Reverentia."

[96] See further Julia Rhyder, "Space and Memory in the Book of Leviticus," in *Scripture as Social Discourse: Social-Scientific Perspectives on Early Jewish and Christian Writings*, eds. Todd Klutz, Casey A. Strine and Jessica M. Keady (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 83–96.

This does not mean, however, that the Priestly ritual laws were concerned only with articulating an idealized literary fiction. The Priestly authors clearly intended for the Israelites who heard these instructions to recognize their enduring normative force. This is especially clear in the specifications that certain laws should be considered a *ḥuqqaṯ ʿôlām* "permanent statute" and some statutes and calendric festivals be performed *bᵉḵōl mōšḇōṯêḵem* "in all your settlements."[97] By setting the rituals within the imaginary past, however, P can describe the rituals as they should be ideally performed, with limited concern for pragmatic considerations that might dilute priestly control over ritual performance.

This idealizing aspect of the Priestly rituals can be particularly observed in the laws of Lev 17, which open the Holiness legislation in Lev 17–26 by stating that whenever the Israelites wish to butcher their animals, they must bring them to the sanctuary for ritual treatment by the Aaronide priests. The law concludes, in v. 7, by stating *ḥuqqaṯ ʿôlām tihyê-zōʾṯ lahem lᵉḏōrōṯām* "this shall be a permanent statute for them throughout their generations," thus affirming the law's application beyond the wilderness setting. Yet, for the ancient readers and hearers of this text, who no longer lived in a camp that enjoyed close proximity to the sanctuary at all times, such a law would have been so impracticable as to be very difficult to enforce; it would have required farmers and pastoralists to travel to the central sanctuary, managed by Aaronide priests, each and every time they needed to kill their livestock![98] It is thus highly improbable that such a law codifies existing practices that prevailed at the time of writing. Rather, the Priestly authors seem to have used the narrative setting at Sinai to promote the type of butchery that they *wished* the Israelites would practice "throughout their generations": namely, slaughter that always deferred to the Aaronide priesthood and thus could provide a constant stream of valuable prebends.

The Late Babylonian temple ritual texts similarly describe rituals in idealized ways that make it unlikely that they could be performed as described. Aside from ritual actions which seem implausible, such as the slapping of the king, the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts include priestly titles that were no longer in use during the Persian and Hellenistic periods. One such title is that of *nadītu*, referring to a class of priestesses that existed during the Old Babylonian period but disappeared during the second half of the second millennium.[99] Similarly, the Late Babylonian ritual texts also mention

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[97] See, e.g., Exod 12:14; 17; Lev 3:17; 7:36; 10:9; 16:29, 31, 34; 17:7; 23:3, 14, 21, 31, 41; etc.

[98] On the impracticability of the law, see further Julia Rhyder, "Ritual Text and Ritual Practice. Some Remarks on Extra-Sanctuary Slaughter in Leviticus," in *Rites aux Portes*, ed. Patrick M. Michel, Etudes genevoises sur l'Antiquité 4 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), 13–21.

[99] The *nadītu* appears in the Palm festival (Çağırgan and Lambert, "Kislīmu Ritual") and in a ritual for Ishtar of Eturkalamma (Da Riva, "Angry Ištar"). For a critical evaluation of the Hellenistic use of her title,

rituals taking place in cultic locations that had ceased to exist by the Hellenistic period at least, such as the temple tower of Babylon, which had become damaged beyond use by the time Alexander the Great arrived in 331.[100] These references to ancient priests and shrines infuse the text with an antiquarian quality, making both the texts and the rituals they describe seem older than they are to grant them more legitimacy.[101]

A further issue that has been pointed out by Uri Gabbay is the style of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, specifically the literary perspective that they offer onto the rituals they describe.[102] Most of the earlier ritual texts from Mesopotamia focus on actions either performed in a single location or conducted by a single actor. Thus, these texts function like a window onto the ritual performance, from which the reader can follow the ritual sequence in its entirety. In contrast, the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts move between performers and spaces. The reader can thus never attain a full overview of the ritual performance, because someone or someplace is always left out of sight. This perspective makes the texts inherently impractical—an aspect that is strengthened by the formal features of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts as material objects; many of them are written on large and heavy clay tablets, which would be challenging to use during ritual performance.[103] They also contain many scribal features and sometimes even exegetical notes, which are inherently impractical and would be entirely omitted during ritual performances.[104]

4 FOREIGN IMPERIAL RULE, THE DESTRUCTION AND RENOVATION OF THE TEMPLE, AND THE

see Debourse, "Women."

[100] Heather D. Baker, "Babylon in 484 BC: The Excavated Archival Tablets as a Source for Urban History," *ZA* 98.1 (2008): 100–116; Andrew R. George, "Xerxes and the Tower of Babel," in *The World of Achaemenid Persia: History, Art and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of a Conference at the British Museum, 29th–1st October 2005*, eds. John Curtis and St John Simpson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 471–80.

[101] On antiquarianism in Late Babylonian Babylonia, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Antiquarian Theology in Seleucid Uruk," *ASJ* 14 (1992): 47–75.

[102] Gabbay, "Ritual texts".

[103] The same can be said for P: the decision to embed the rituals into a large narrative work would have naturally reduced their functionality in guiding actual ritual practice. David M. Carr ("Rethinking the Materiality of Biblical Texts: From Source, Tradition and Redaction to a Scroll Approach," *ZAW* 132.4 [2020]: 594–621) estimates that the "full Priestly stratum (including H and various PS elements) […] would need a large format scroll of 15 to 16.3 meters" (614), a length that might suggest that P "originated on separate written (scroll) media" (616). In any case, such a lengthy scroll or scrolls would almost certainly have been difficult to consult during a ritual performance.

[104] Debourse, "Temple Ritual Texts"; id., *Of Priests and Kings*, 201–18.

TEXTUALIZATION OF RITUAL

In sum, despite their different religious and literary outlooks, P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts share several important, and distinctive features that advance a comparable discursive agenda; namely, to promote an idealized form of ritual practice that can affirm the centrality of the priesthood and marginalize the cultic role of the king within their respective contexts. The question that now arises is how we might explain these similar discursive agendas, given that a direct literary connection between P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts is highly unlikely. No evidence survives of direct contact between the people who wrote P and the priests responsible for the LBPL; we cannot assume that one ritual corpus was inspired by the other. Rather than positing genetic links between P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, we argue that these materials share these discursive elements because they were forged during similar historical crises that provoked analogous (although not identical) textual outputs from the temple communities that experienced them.

The Late Babylonian temple ritual texts can be firmly situated within the Late Persian and Hellenistic periods (484–141)—periods which are well-documented in the rich cuneiform archival evidence that has survived, as well as the hundreds of so-called "chronographic" texts that record the events of the day.[105] This was a time of foreign imperial rule, first Persian (539–331), then Graeco-Macedonian and Seleucid (331–141). During those centuries, cuneiform culture became gradually confined to the temples of a few cities, most prominently those of Babylon and Uruk.[106] Historically, these institutions had enjoyed direct interaction with the king, who endorsed the priests as local elites and played an active role in the temple cult.[107] After the Persian conquest in 539, however, Babylonian temple communities gradually lost their prominence, as the imperial centers shifted away from the Babylonian heartland.[108] Simultaneously, royal involvement in the cult waned, while taxation of temple

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[105] For a historical overview with references, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *A History of Babylon, 2200 BC–AD 75,* Blackwell History of the Ancient World (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 246–68. For the chronographic texts, see Robartus J. van der Spek, et al., *Babylonian Chronographic Texts from the Hellenistic Period* (Atlanta: SBL Press, forthcoming).

[106] Clancier, *Bibliothèques*.

[107] Waerzeggers, "Pious King."

[108] Kristin Kleber, "The Religious Policy of the Teispid and Achaemenid Kings in Babylonia," in *Persische Reichspolitik und lokale Heiligtümer: Beiträge einer Tagung des Exzellenzclusters 'Religion und Politik in Vormoderne und Moderne' vom 24.–26. Februar 2016 in Münster*, ed. Reinhard Achenbach, BZABR 25 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 99–120; Caroline Waerzeggers, "Babylonian Kingship in the Persian Period: Performance and Reception," in *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context*, eds. Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers, BZAW 478 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 181–222.

communities rose exponentially.[109] Matters came to a head in the year 484, when northern Babylonian priesthoods rebelled against Xerxes's rule.[110] The Persian king took harsh measures against the rebels, effectively shutting down the daily worship of the gods and perhaps damaging temple architecture in the process.[111] As a result, the northern Babylonian priesthoods disappeared from the record, a phenomenon known as "the End of Archives."[112] While the Babylonian south had not participated in the rebellions, its temple communities were also strongly affected, albeit less directly.[113] Hence, while the events of the year 484 cannot be traced exactly, they seem to have caused a near complete destruction of Babylonian temple life.[114]

Most temple communities never recovered, the most important exceptions being those of Babylon and Uruk.[115] At Babylon, cultic

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[109] Michael Jursa, "Epistolographic Evidence for the Trips to Susa by Borsippean Priests and for the Crisis in Borsippa at the Beginning of Xerxes' Reign," *Arta* 2013.3 (2013): 1–12.

[110] See the essays in Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire, eds., *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

[111] For Sippar, see Michael Jursa, "Xerxes: The Case of Sippar and the Ebabbar Temple," in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 63–72; for Babylon, see Johannes Hackl, "The Esangila Temple During the Late Achaemenid Period and the Impact of Xerxes' Reprisals on the Northern Babylonian Temple Households," in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 165–88; George, "Xerxes and the Tower of Babel."

[112] Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Babylonian Revolts against Xerxes and the 'End of Archives'," *AfO* 50 (2003–2004): 150–73; Karlheinz Kessler, "Urukäische Familien versus babylonische Familien," *AoF* 31.2 (2004): 237–62.

[113] At Uruk, an administrative reform had taken place already under the rule of Darius I in 520. At that time, the temple archive was sorted through and deposited, leaving us with a "closed" or "dead" archive. Documents that were written later seem to have been stored elsewhere and have not been found. From at least ca. 500 to 435, there are no cuneiform texts coming from urban Uruk. On this phenomenon, see further Jursa, "Xerxes"; Karlheinz Kessler, "Uruk: The Fate of the Eanna Archive, the Gimil-Nanāya B Archive, and Their Archaeological Evidence," in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 73–88.

[114] For a lengthy discussion of these issues and the supporting evidence, see the essays in Waerzeggers and Seire, *Xerxes and Babylonia.*

[115] The scale and success of the renovation projects at Uruk and Babylon stands in sharp contrast to other Babylonian communities that survived after 484, including Nippur, Larsa, Ur, Borsippa, Cutha, Kish/Hursagkalamma, and possibly Sippar, for which very little evidence survives; see Philippe Clancier and Julien Monerie, "Les sanctuaires autochtones et le roi dans l'Orient hellénistique: entre autonomie et soumission," *Topoi* 19.1 (2014): 181–237; Robartus J. van der Spek, "Nippur, Sippar, and Larsa in the Hellenistic Period," in *Nippur at the Centennial: Papers Read at the 35e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale. Philadelphia 1988*, ed. Maria deJong Ellis,

restoration involved the renovation of Esangil, the temple of the city's traditional patron deity Marduk. This building project fell largely on the local community, although there is some evidence of early Seleucid involvement, most famously in the form of the Antiochus Cylinder.[116] Yet, this royal support quickly waned, which seems to have prompted the temple community to erect a more manageable cultic structure, the so-called "Temple of Daily Worship."[117] Rebuilding the temple involved more than updating the cultic architecture, however; it also included the reorganization of the temple household and its administration.[118] Most likely, this administrative restructuring took place before the renovation of the temple building, and it had drastic consequences for the priestly elite.[119] The preexisting systems that had traditionally upheld priestly prestige, such as the distinction between the prebendary priesthood and non-prebendaries, were abolished.[120] This loss of priestly importance was

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Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 14 (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1992), 235–60.

[116] The "last royal inscription" from Mesopotamia records the renovation of Ezida in Borsippa and Esangil in Babylon by king Antiochus I; see Kathryn Stevens, "The Antiochos Cylinder, Babylonian Scholarship and Seleucid Imperial Ideology," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 134 (2014): 66–88. Corroborating evidence of this event is contained in an Astronomical Diary (no. -273B, rev. 38'–39'), which relates how the king had bricks made for the project; see further Abraham J. Sachs and Hermann Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia: Volume 1, Diaries from 652 B.C. to 262 B.C.*, ADART 1 (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988). The renovation of the temple, however, was most likely already started prior to the arrival of Alexander the Great (331). See the Late Achaemenid dossier of votive offerings donated specifically "for the clearing of debris from the site of Esangil"; on this evidence, see further Julien Monerie, *L'économie de la Babylonie à l'époque hellénistique*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 14 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 98–101.

[117] On this complex matter, which remains debated, see Johannes Hackl, "Nochmals zum é ud.1.kam und seiner vermeintlichen Rolle im babylonischen Neujahrsfest—ein Beitrag zur Kulttopographie Babylons in hellenistischer Zeit," *ZA* 111.1 (2021): 88–99; Céline Debourse, "The 'Day One Temple': A New Home for the Gods of Babylon?", *WZKM* 110 (2020): 145–64.

[116] Hackl, "Esangila Temple."

[119] The main body of evidence for this reorganization of the temple household is the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Esangil archive (Hackl, "Esangila Temple"; Johannes Hackl, *Materialien zu Recht, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im Nordbabylonien der spätachämenidischen und hellenistischen Zeit: Urkundenlehre, Archivkunde, Texte*, Achaemenid History 18 [Leiden: NINO-Peeters, forthcoming]), in which the new administration and structure are *faits accomplis*. Evidence for preliminary building activity (e.g., clearing debris) is found in the same archive; see Monerie, *L'économie*, 95–103.

[120] For these earlier systems upholding priestly prestige, see Bastian Still, *The Social World of the Babylonian Priest,* CHANE 103 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 178–231.

strengthened by the process of poliadization, in which Graeco-Macedonian institutions slowly but surely curtailed the agency and autonomy of the traditional Babylonian temple community.[121]

In these times of hardship, the Babylonian priesthood engaged in the creation of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, in which they presented themselves as the main agents with ritual agency in Babylon. In so doing, they advanced a strategic discourse aimed at legitimizing the priesthood's existence by emphasizing the continuity of the Marduk cult under the priesthood's authority in absence of royal support. We can thus situate the textualization of ritual at Babylon within this frame of cultic disruption and renovation under foreign imperial rule, even though we unfortunately cannot situate the texts more precisely, owing to the fact that the LBPL materials from Babylon lack colophons and clear archaeological context, with the result that they cannot be explicitly dated.[122]

Thankfully, more is known of the situation at Uruk. There, cultic recovery took the form of a drastic cultic reform: for millennia the goddess Ištar had been worshipped as patron goddess in the Eanna temple, but sometime after 484 she came to be replaced by the god Anu as main deity of the city.[123] A new temple, called Bīt Rēš (literally "House of the Beginning"), was erected for Anu during the third century in a project that took around seventy-five years to complete.[124] Three building phases are archaeologically and textually attested.[125] In the first step, the temple tower and a small shrine at its base were constructed (ca. 275). A dossier of official correspondence reveals limited royal involvement in the building project; the initiative rather came from the Urukean priesthood. The second construction phase (244), which saw the expansion of the temple complex, as well as the third construction phase (202), in which the cella of the deity was embellished, were carried out by local officials, who commemorated their actions in building inscriptions. As at Babylon, the Seleucid crown offered some initial support, which quickly waned; this forced the Urukean community to take full responsibility for the construction project.[126] Importantly, the same agents who managed the temple building project also engaged in the creation of texts that rooted the new Anu cult in a distant past and laid out the

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[121] Clancier and Monerie, "Sanctuaires."

[122] See Clancier, *Bibliothèques*.

[123] This development is traced by Krul, *Revival*, with further references.

[124] The first unambiguous attestation of the Bīt Rēš dates to ca. 275; see Julien Monerie and Philippe Clancier, "A Compendium of Official Correspondence from Seleucid Uruk," *AoF* 50.1 (2023): 63–82.

[125] Monerie and Clancier, "Compendium."

[126] See also Monerie, *L'économie*, 349–88; Julien Monerie, "Women and Prebends in Seleucid Uruk," in *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East*, eds. Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 13 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 526–42.

rules for its ideal performance.[127] Clearly, building a new temple involved more than architecture; the fundament of the renovation project constituted a holistic approach to sanctuary, priesthood, ritual, and pantheon that required text as well as a renewed physical structure.

Crucially, many of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts from Uruk have preserved a colophon with a date, which allows us to relate the textualization of ritual directly to these historical developments. Several ritual texts date to the second half of the third century, including the kettledrum ritual and several versions of the temple building ritual.[128] These texts all belong to the professional library of the Sîn-lēqi-unninni family, which monopolized the profession of *kalû* (lamentation priest) in the Bīt Rēš temple.[129] It is striking that the textualization of the kettledrum and temple building rituals, both of which arguably relate to the establishment of the physical sanctuary, coincided with the process of building the Bīt Rēš. Moreover, among all the Late Babylonian temple ritual materials, these two ritual texts are most closely related to earlier textual-ritual traditions.[130] These Late Babylonian versions can thus be considered adaptations of older rituals that were given new textualized forms in light of the new historical challenges posed by the construction of the temple.

Another set of Late Babylonian temple ritual texts was found in the library of the Ekur-zākir family of *āšipu*s, most of which date to the early second century, i.e., after the Bīt Rēš was completed.[131] One of these ritual compositions bears a famous colophon, considered to be a pious fraud, which recounts how at the beginning of the third century a Urukean priest called Kidin-Anu recovered a set of ritual tablets that had been taken to Elam by king Nabopolassar. The current exemplar was said to be a copy of those tablets.[132] There is little reason to believe this story,[133] but it is interesting to observe

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[127] Beaulieu, "Antiquarian Theology"; Eckart Frahm, "Zwischen Tradition und Neuerung. Babylonische Priestergelehrte im achämenidenzeitlichen Uruk," in *Religion und Religionskontakte im Zeitalter der Achämeniden*, ed. Reinhard G. Kratz, VWGTh 22 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002), 80–108; Krul, *Revival*.

[128] The most important are TU 44, TU 45, TU 46; see Linssen, *Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, 252–98.

[129] For an overview and study of the libraries of Late Babylonian Uruk, see Clancier, *Bibliothèques*. For the Sîn-lēqi-unninni family, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The Descendants of Sîn-lēqi-unninni," in *Assyriologica et Semitica: Festschrift für Joachim Oelsner anläßlich seines 65. Geburtstages am 18. Februar 1997*, eds. Joachim Marzahn and Hans Neumann, AOAT 252 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), 1–16.

[130] For the building ritual, see Ambos, *Baurituale*; for the kettledrum ritual, see Gabbay, "Drums, Hearts, Bulls."

[131] The most important are TU 38 (daily offerings) and TU 39–40 (*akītu*). BRM IV, 7 dates to the middle of the third century (Linssen, *Cults of Uruk and Babylon*, 172–214).

[132] Krul, *Revival*, 102–6; Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 409–40.

[133] Krul, *Revival,* 105 explains why; but see Frahm, "Zwischen Tradition

how it implies that the ritual tablets were "returned" *before* the construction of the temple had begun. Thus, the colophon not only connected the ritual text to an older textual tradition, but it also rooted the rituals of the Anu cult itself, performed in the Bīt Rēš, in an ancient past, thus providing text, ritual, and temple with imagined antiquity.[134]

Hence, at Uruk (and very likely at Babylon, too) the impetus for the textualization of ritual seems to have been the (re)building of the temple and the legitimation of its renewed ritual cult. The writing of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts was a prolonged process that probably started before the temple was constructed but intensified both during and after the building process. These ritual materials reflect the desires of Babylonian priests to create successful temple cults under foreign rule—a situation that brought specific challenges to their traditional communities, such as navigating how to engage in cultic practice without a native monarch, and how to affirm the priests' right to assume new cultic roles that had traditionally been performed by the king. The Late Babylonian temple ritual texts were not meant to be used as handbooks, which would provide literal guides for the rituals that were to be performed in the rebuilt temples. Rather, they promoted idealized ritual practice and hierarchies that would provide the ideological scaffolding to ensure the success of the priestly project; namely, the continuity of the cult under priestly leadership in the new temple.[135] In reality, temple worship operated in a more pragmatic way, and the priests remained subjected to foreign imperial powers—powers that are, significantly, completely omitted from the ritual texts.

In other words, in the case of the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts, ritual textualization served primarily as a strategy for establishing the legitimacy of the new temples, the authority of their priesthoods, and the stability of Babylonian (religious) traditions in a world that was growing ever more foreign to these temple communities. Indeed, beyond the challenge of establishing a functioning cult, the rapid socio-political changes that were caused by foreign imperial rule meant that Late Babylonian priests also had to struggle to redefine traditional Babylonian life and identity within a rapidly changing world—an identity that they now tied more strongly to the worship

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und Neuerung," 100–101.

[134] In reality, these texts were probably composed a while after the construction of the temple had finished.

[135] The question of how these ritual texts precisely related to actual ritual performance remains unanswered for now. As far as we know, there is no evidence external to the ritual texts themselves that would indicate their recitation in public or use during a ritual performance. There may be one exception, however, found in an Astronomical Diary, which modern scholars believe may refer to the performance of the temple building ritual at Babylon "according to the inscriptions in front of it"; see Wayne Horowitz, "Antiochus I, Esagil, and a Celebration of the Ritual for Renovation of Temples," *ZA* 85.1 (1991): 75–77.

of their respective deities than had previously been the case. The textualization of ritual seems to have been one of the ways in which the priesthoods sought to respond to the incongruous cultural, political, and religious situation in which they found themselves.[136]

The Jerusalem temple community experienced similar ideological and cultic vulnerabilities when faced with the catastrophes of Neo-Babylonian invasion, the looting and destruction of the temple in 589–586, and the challenge of reestablishing the temple cult without a local royal sponsor in the Persian era. Like other Near Eastern temple communities, the Jerusalem priesthood attached considerable importance to cultic continuity and the maintenance of the daily cult and regular sacrifices, as well as the protection of the sacred precinct from impure elements and unwanted interference from nefarious agents. The temple also relied heavily on its close association with the indigenous (Davidic) monarch, who was not only charged with protecting the temple cult from improper innovation but was also key to sustaining its day-to-day sacrificial operations by providing a steady stream of financial donations. The conquest of Jerusalem was thus poised to become a cultic, political, and ideological disaster for the temple and its priestly attendants.

To begin with, the Neo-Babylonians' decision to destroy the temple provoked a long-term hiatus in the temple's daily rites and the performance of regular sacrifices to Yhwh. While it is possible that limited ritual practice continued in the ruins of the Jerusalem temple, the shrine lacked a formal cultic structure until Judah came under Persian control in 539.[137] According to biblical sources, the temple was only rebuilt between the second and sixth year of the reign of Darius I (521–485), and thus between 520–515, around seventy years after it was originally destroyed.[138] We can thus be confident that there was a significant break in its cultic operations and priestly lineage. Beyond this, the Neo-Babylonian conquest also ended the Davidic monarchy and severed the link between the Jerusalem priesthood and indigenous royal leadership. Much as when the Persians arrived in Babylonia, the beginning of Neo-Babylonian hegemony in Judah saw a substantial shift in the center of political

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[136] See already Smith, "Pearl"; also, Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings*, 352–56.

[137] See especially Jer 41:5, which reports that men "from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria" visited the Jerusalem temple ruins "carrying meal offerings and frankincense to present at the temple of Yhwh." On ritual practice in Jerusalem during the exile, see further, e.g., Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Age of the Exile," in *The Biblical World*, ed. John Barton (London: Routledge, 2002), 411–34, here 420; Yair Hoffman, "The Fasts in the Book of Zechariah and the Fashioning of National Remembrance," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 169–218, esp. 188–89.

[138] For a more extensive discussion of the biblical evidence for the temple rebuilding and the various debates that concern the precise dating of this project, see Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult*, 73–75.

power, such that Jerusalem no longer served as the seat of governance that housed the most important political leaders. Besides the Neo-Babylonian kings being located hundreds of kilometers away in Babylon, the empire seems to have chosen to situate the imperially-appointed governor at the Benjamite site of Mizpah, approximately 12 kilometers north of Jerusalem.[139] When the Persians eventually took control of the province in 539, they do not appear to have restored Jerusalem as the administrative center of the province, but to have moved the seat of the imperial governorship from Mizpah to Ramat Raḥel, located approximately five kilometers south of Jerusalem.[140] As a result, Jerusalem remained in a somewhat marginalized position within the imperial administration of the province for most of the ensuing Persian era.

While Persian rule gave Judean elites the opportunity to rebuild the Jerusalem temple, the restoration project faced considerable challenges. We unfortunately lack documentary evidence with which to reconstruct its exact stages or to verify the precise agents involved. Various biblical texts, however, suggest that the project was spearheaded by small groups of deportees in Babylonia who began to return to Jerusalem in the early Persian era.[141] The fact that these deportees had been away from the land of Israel for over half a century almost certainly created considerable social tensions with those who had remained. Indeed, Ezra-Nehemiah and late prophetic works such as Third Isaiah strongly emphasize the considerable stresses that characterized Judean society, and the management of the temple, throughout the Persian period.[142]

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[139] On the Neo-Babylonian appointment of governors who resided in Mizpah, see 2 Kgs 25:22–26; Jer 40:6–41:18; on the interpretation of these passages, which is the subject of significant dispute, cf. e.g., Joel Weinberg, "Gedaliah, the Son of Ahikam in Mizpah: His Status and Role, Supporters and Opponents," *ZAW* 119.3 (2007): 356–68; John Ritzema, "After Zedekiah: Who and What was Gedaliah ben Ahikam?", *JSOT* 42.1 (2017): 73–91. On the archaeological evidence from Mizpah, see Jeffrey R. Zorn, "Mizpah: Newly Discovered Stratum Reveals Judah's Other Capital," *BAR* 23.5 (1997): 28–38, 66; Jeffrey R. Zorn, "Tell en-Naṣbeh and the Problem of the Material Culture of the Sixth Century," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period,* eds. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 413–47.

[140] On the archaeological remains at Ramat Raḥel that support this conclusion, see Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Dafna Langgut, "The Riddle of Ramat Raḥel: The Archaeology of a Royal Persian Period Edifice," *Transeu* 41 (2012): 57–79.

[141] Cf. Ezra 6:14–15; Hag 1; Zech 1–8.

[142] See further, e.g., Christophe Nihan, "Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56–66," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, eds. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 67–104; Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "From Ezekiel to Ezra-Nehemiah: Shifts of Group Identities within Babylonian Exilic Ideology," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, eds. Oded Lipschits, Gary

The temple building works seem also to have been hampered by the poverty and depopulation that afflicted the city of Jerusalem, and the province of Yehûd more broadly, in the years of Persian rule. While texts like Ezra 1:7–11; 6:1–12; 7:15–24; and 8:36 claim that the Persian kings Cyrus, Darius I, and Artaxerxes I provided generous financial support for the rebuilding of the temple and exempted its priests from taxation, no historical evidence suggests that the Persians adopted such a favorable policy towards such a small temple in a marginal location like Yehûd.[143] In general, the Persian powers seem to have tolerated local temples, but without offering financial support for their cultic operations. They expected the priesthoods of such local cults to pay levies and taxes to the empire.[144] As we already observed, the temples at Uruk and Babylon were afflicted with considerable tax requirements when they fell under Persian rule; there is little reason to believe that Jerusalem would have been treated any differently. An increased tax burden would perhaps explain why the book of Nehemiah claims that the Jerusalem priesthood continued to suffer financial difficulties and revenue problems well into the fifth century.[145] Nehemiah 13:10–14 lament, for instance, that without an increase in local donations, the Jerusalem temple would have been unable to continue funding the Levitical priests during the time of Nehemiah's governorship.

It thus appears that the Jerusalem temple community of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian era faced comparable challenges to those that affected the temples of Uruk and Babylon during the years of Persian and later Seleucid rule. Of course, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the Babylonian exile, and the rebuilding of the Second Temple do not map perfectly onto the historical process that saw the Babylonian cults destroyed in 484 and later restored at Uruk and Babylon. Yet, despite their differences, the crises that befell the cities of Uruk, Babylon, and Jerusalem shared some important similarities. Besides the fact that these cities were eventually subjected to the imperial control of the same empire (namely, the Persians, and later also the Seleucids), the advent of foreign rule in all three contexts caused similar disruptions to the indigenous religious and cultural systems that had sustained their temple priesthoods for centuries. As already mentioned, the temple communities at Uruk, Baby-

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N. Knoppers, and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 127–51.

[143] See further the discussion at Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult*, 75–77, with additional references.

[144] Muhammad A. Dandamaev and Vladimir G. Lukonin, *The Culture and Social Institutions of Ancient Iran*, trans. Philip L. Kohl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 362–66.

[145] See further, e.g., Peter R. Bedford, "The Economic Role of the Jerusalem Temple in Achaemenid Judah: Comparative Perspectives," in *Shai le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, Its Exegesis and Language*, eds. Mosheh Bar-Asher, et al. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2007), 3*–20*.

lon, and Jerusalem had all previously functioned with a similar dependence on native kingship and the prestige that their association with the palace entailed. Hence, the loss of a close connection to royal power was poised to have similarly disastrous effects in all three locales. Moreover, the priestly elites at Uruk, Babylon, and Jerusalem placed similar emphasis on the importance of ensuring the continuity of their respective temple cults and their daily sacrifices and regular rites, such that their prolonged interruption was again poised to create similar religious and ideological crises. Finally, with the advent of foreign rule in each of these three cities, their priestly elites faced similar pragmatic obstacles to reestablishing their temple cults; they were all forced to raise the necessary finances with minimal assistance from a local king or the imperial powers, and with the additional tax burden that came with being subjected to foreign imperial rule.

When faced with these similar historical pressures, we argue that the priestly communities of Jerusalem, Uruk, and Babylon engaged in comparable processes of ritual textualization so as to promote the cultic ideals that, they believed, would allow them to survive such tumultuous circumstances. Regrettably, this assertion cannot be supported by material evidence from Jerusalem of the kind that has been preserved in Uruk and Babylon—we do not have access to the physical manuscripts produced by and housed within the Jerusalem temple in the Persian period, nor the type of documentary evidence that might detail historical events that shaped the temple restoration in the sixth or fifth century. Yet, while this lack of material evidence makes it impossible to prove that the Priestly ritual texts were among the literary output of the Jerusalem priesthood in the early Persian period, the comparison with the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts adds an important interpretive control to significantly bolster such a theory.

The Late Babylonian temple ritual texts provide clear evidence that many of the distinctive discursive elements of the Priestly ritual materials—their emphasis on priestly hegemony, their omission of the king, and even their imaginative qualities—were used by other Near Eastern temple communities to minimize the harm of cultic disruption and ensure the success of temple rebuilding projects when living under a foreign empire (and, more particularly, the Persian empire). Specifically, the Late Babylonian evidence reveals that it was the writing of a new form of "priestly literature," and especially the substantial ritual texts such literature contained, that allowed such communities to affirm the legitimacy of their restored cultic operations by elevating the priestly figures who were now to become the central agents in sustaining the temple and its ritual activities. The comparison with the LBPL thus increases the probability that these discursive features of the Priestly ritual texts reflect their origins within a temple community facing similar historical challenges to those that affected the priests of Uruk and Babylon.

We therefore contend that, beginning either in the exile or, perhaps more likely when the temple restoration project was beginning to get underway in the early Persian era, the priests in Jerusalem engaged in a substantial project of ritual textualization that served several aims simultaneously. First, as already observed by Wellhausen and more recently Feder, the textualization project enabled traditional rites of the Yahwistic cult, which were presumably familiar from the First Temple, to find a new means of written preservation. This allowed the Jerusalem priesthood to mitigate the effects of the cultic disruption caused by the destruction of the temple and its prolonged cultic hiatus by demonstrating their ability to maintain the most important ritual sequences that had sustained the cult in the past. Second, and arguably more importantly, the textualization project allowed the Jerusalem priesthood to use the story of Israel's origins to affirm the cultic ideals that, they believed, would allow the Second Temple to survive the pressures of foreign imperial rule. The ritual instructions invoke a time of cultic stability in the distant past to provide a model for how to establish, maintain, and perform the rites of a successful sanctuary cult without the need for a local royal leader (or, for that matter, a benevolent empire). The rituals also consistently affirm the centrality of the Aaronide priests, and especially the high priest, for ensuring that the deity's preferred rites are performed correctly, and that the sanctuary remains free from polluting elements. The non-priestly members of the community, meanwhile, are reminded of their duty not only to willingly contribute to the sanctuary construction project and its sacrificial operations; they must also recognize the priests' exclusive leadership within the temple and their ritual expertise in mitigating impurity outside the shrine.

Altogether, the Priestly ritual texts express the Jerusalem priesthood's aspirations for a functioning ritual cult that might secure the future of their sanctuary and priestly community in a time of significant social, religious, and economic upheaval. The process of textualizing these rituals likely extended beyond the initial years of the temple reconstruction, as new rituals were progressively added to the Pentateuch during the fifth, and likely also the fourth century. While reconstructing the precise stages of this compositional process is beyond the scope of this essay, the comparison with the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts suggests that the textualization of ritual continued to serve as an important strategy through the various stages of the temple restoration, allowing the Jerusalem priesthood, as it had the priests at Uruk and Babylon, to find a means of survival with hope for the future.[146]

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[146] A further issue that cannot be discussed in this article, owing to limitations of space, is how the process of ritual textualization in P might have affected not only the Jerusalem priesthood but also the priests at Gerizim, where a new temple appears to have been constructed in the mid-to-late fifth century (on the archaeological evidence for a Persian period sanctuary at Gerizim, see Yitzhak Magen, Haggai Misgav, and Levana Tsfania, *Mount*

5 CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that it is not simply "pseudo-historicism" to claim that ritual textualization in P was most likely a reaction to the historical circumstances of the Neo-Babylonian conquest and the subsequent challenge of restoring the temple in the Persian era. It is a claim that finds important corroborating evidence in relevant Near Eastern parallels, specifically the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts from Uruk and Babylon. These Late Babylonian ritual materials can be securely situated in a context of foreign imperial rule, temple destruction, and cultic restoration. Moreover, they evince not only broad formal similarities with P, but a similar discursive interest to affirm priestly agency, marginalize the role of the king, and describe the rituals in a way that invokes an idealized past. These common aspects arguably betray their origins in comparable historical situations; namely, in temple communities facing the pressures that came with the arrival of foreign empires and the loss of traditional cultic structures. Through the creation of ritual texts, their priestly authors sought to influence their environment by legitimizing and sustaining the priesthood, the rituals, and the cult that, in their eyes, should allow their renewed temples to function successfully. As such, the ritual texts themselves actively contributed to the rebuilding of the temple and helped to ensure its success after reconstruction by providing its discursive justification.

This analysis has several implications for the study of ritual textualization in the Priestly traditions of the Pentateuch, the LBPL, and the ancient Near East more broadly. First, it highlights the significant value of the comparative method for solidifying the argument that the textualization of ritual in P was inextricably linked to a specific historical setting, and thus cannot be described as a purely literary project. While the comparative study of P has typically focused mainly on earlier materials from the Bronze and Iron Ages, our analysis affirms the immense value of widening the scope of comparison to include Late Babylonian materials. Such a comparison does not seek to establish genetic links between P and these Babylonian sources; nor does it seek to uncover the original ritual genre of the

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Gerizim Excavations: Vol. I, The Aramaic, Hebrew and Samaritan Inscriptions, trans. Edward Levin and Michael Guggenheimer, Judea and Samaria Publications 2 [Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2004] and Yitzhak Magen, *Mount Gerizim Excavations: Vol. 2, A Temple City*, trans. Edward Levin and Carl Ebert, Judea and Samaria Publications 8 [Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2008]). The Samarian priests at Gerizim seem to have acknowledged the authority of the Priestly ritual texts, and to have even claimed descent from the figure of Aaron. Nonetheless, the subtle Judean bias that can be detected in several Priestly passages that concern the leadership of the wilderness cult arguably supports the view that the Priestly ritual texts were composed by priests in Jerusalem, and only later accepted by the Samarian priesthood as part of a shared Pentateuch. For a lengthy discussion of this issue, see Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult*, 70–80, 124–28, 163–70.

Priestly ritual instructions. It is rather intended to elucidate how the writing of ritual with strong imaginative qualities, and with a particular discursive focus on priestly authority, could help the Jerusalem temple community survive the ideological and practical challenges of adjusting to life under foreign empire. We have laid out here some of the most striking similarities between P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts that concern their overarching discursive interests. It is our hope that this will be the beginning of much more elaborate and detailed comparison of these materials, and which can hopefully be developed in future studies that explore additional similarities and differences between them.

Second, our analysis of P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts has highlighted the dynamism of ritual textualization as a historical strategy for dealing with cultic and political upheaval in the first millennium. The writing of ritual achieved much more than the preservation of traditional rites for practical performance. Both P and the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts demonstrate that ritual textualization was as much aimed at normalizing cultic *change* as it was intended to sustain the status quo. These ritual materials not only promote new rites (such as the slapping of the king) that have no known counterpart in earlier materials; they also promote new cultic hierarchies and responsibilities that could ensure the privileges and economic security of their priesthoods, regardless of the political and religious challenges they now faced. The Priestly and Late Babylonian ritual texts therefore affirm Bell's key insight that ritual texts do not simply mirror historical reality, but rather seek to actively transform it, thereby serving as agents of change that allow their authors to rectify and influence the historical situation at hand.

Finally, our case study of the ritual texts in P and the LBPL has shown the potential of using ritual texts as historical sources for reconstructing the ancient Near Eastern past. While the Priestly ritual texts and the Late Babylonian temple ritual materials do not provide a historical account of the difficulties that arose following the advent of foreign imperial rule in Judah or Babylonia, they provide crucial evidence of the kind of discursive strategies that developed in response to such historical challenges, and which were used by local elites to overcome them. Much more can be done to explore this potential for ritual texts to elucidate the cultic and political history of the ancient Near East, and in particular the complex relationship between religious change and foreign imperial pressure in the mid-to-late first millennium.