

# The Priestly Blessing and Its Environs: An Exaltation of Moses, the Aaronites, and the Israelites (Nb 6:22-27)

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ENGL 395  
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Nb 6:22-27 (Authorized King James Version):

22 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,

23 [a] Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, [b] On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them,

24 The LORD bless thee, and keep thee:

25 The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:

26 The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

27 [a] And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, [b] and I will bless them.

(Carroll and Prickett 170)

The pericope Nb 6:22-27 is a remarkable mix of traditions, time periods, and theological statements. I will investigate these by first analyzing the blessing at its center, both for its structure and content, and comparing it to relevant passages in the Hebrew Bible (HB). Subsequently, I will construct an understanding of the surrounding verses in the pericope (6:22-23, 27), in their authorship as well as their effect on the significance of the pericope. Finally, I will present two framings of the pericope in its larger context, Nb 1:1-10:10.

## 1. The Priestly Blessing (vv. 24-26)

The priestly benediction of Nb 6:24-26 is made up of three verses, each with two cola (Korpel 4).<sup>1</sup> The verses' second cola increase in comprehensiveness from one to the next - the first provides God's protection, the second God's graciousness, and the third שָׁלוֹם (peace). Korpel (7) writes that verses could likely be added to or removed from this particular blessing formula, a conclusion drawn from common practice in poetry of this style, the similarity of each verse's first colon, and from archaeological evidence of blessing formulas that seem to be contracted or expanded versions of the one found in Nb 6:24-26. Seebass (38) notes the metric, cascading

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<sup>1</sup> As Korpel explains, a colon (plural cola) is a rather flexible structural element in Northwest Semitic Poetry consisting of between one and five feet (stressed words or combinations of words).

nature of the successive verses. Additionally, the three verses are connected by a common (jussive) verb tense and an a-b structure of a) God moving towards the people and b) God acting in some manner on their behalf (Miller 243). Each verse has a rather discrete subject (an Aaronite), individually addressed object (the Israelite), and a strong presence of YHWH as an indirect subject (Seebass 38). Clearly, it is God issuing the blessing (Ibid); the role of the priest is merely to remind God to do so (Smoak 26).

One reason why this blessing is of great importance and effect is the centrality of God in the act of blessing. God's name is invoked three times over its course. This establishes that God Himself is the one doing the blessing, contrasting with Lv 9:22, in which Aaron blesses the people, or 2 Sm 6:18, in which David blesses the people (Seebass 41-42). Additionally, it renders the blessing function a revelation of God's name to the people Israel, a revelation that was intensely climactic in its first occurrence in Ex 3:14. Another interesting part of this blessing is the internal parallelism of the first verse: the verbs "bless" and "keep" are often used in conjunction throughout the HB, though always with different subjects, for example that God will bless the people if they keep His commandments (e.g. Dt 30:16) (Korpel 5). This emphasizes that God is the only active agent in this blessing formula, to the exclusion of both the priest issuing the blessing and the Israelite receiving it.

The aspect of the blessing that gave me most pause on first reading was God promising to show the Israelites his face as blessing in the second and third verses' first cola. As Wilson (109) notes, in the HB God's face is a source of blessing in some cases (e.g. Nb 6:24-26, Gn 33:10) and a cause of death in others (e.g. Ex 33:20). Ex 33:20, in fact, seems to rule out the possibility of *anyone* seeing God's face and surviving. Nevertheless, seeing God's face has a positive impact on several Biblical characters throughout the bible: Jacob (Gn 32:31), Moses (Ex 33:11), and Gideon (Jg 6:22) all greatly strengthen their morality or gain in confidence after direct encounters with God's face, as indicated by the phrase פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים - literally, face to face - appearing in each indicated passage (Wilson 110-112). Additionally, the Nb 6:25 formulation of God making his face shine upon the blessed is similar to one found elsewhere in the HB (Korpel 6).<sup>2</sup> Nb 6:26 contrasts the notion of showing one's face, with its connotations of holding someone to account for their<sup>3</sup> wrongs (Seebass 40); and God's promise of peace, which, much like God's insistence that He shows mercy onto thousands after threats of punishment (e.g. Dt 5:10), somewhat softens the fear of retribution after what could be seen as a threat of punishment. Lastly, the notion of God shining his face borrows a metaphor from Mesopotamian notions of a divine being as a sun,

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<sup>2</sup> Specific appearances include Ps 31:17, 80:4, 8, 20, and Dn 9:17.

<sup>3</sup> I'm not sure if this singular *they* requires a footnote, as it's rather widely accepted as an alternative to "his or her."

which would undoubtedly have been familiar to the authors of this blessing (Korpel 6).<sup>4</sup> In sum, the use of the topic of the divine face in this passage serves to heighten the drama/peril of the blessing as well as recall the positive impact of contact with God in other parts of the HB.

## **2. Immediate Framing (Nb 6:22-23, 27)**

The surrounding passages of the pericope frame the blessing as an Aaronite saying transmitted through Moses. 6:22-23a represent the Priestly writer, and outline the line of transmission of the blessing: God tells Moses, who in turn is to tell Aaron and his sons, who are to bless the Israelites. This a) prioritizes Moses as an important figure as the receiver of God's word, and b) cements the Aaronites' status as experts in their ability to command blessing from God. Moses's reception of God's word also elevates the text simply by including the direct words of God. This is strengthened through the inclusion of an earlier literary source than its framing as the word of God. The redactor participates in a great biblical tradition of using old sources to grant historical weight and legitimacy to a text (Carroll and Prickett xxiii).

6:23b and 6:27 seem to come from an older writer than 6:22-23a (Seebass 51, footnote 48), and involve God's promise that He will bless and put his name upon the children of Israel if Aaronites recite this blessing to them.<sup>5</sup> 6:27a emphasizes the revelatory aspect of the blessing, namely that the Aaronites are given the (unique?) privilege/ability to say God's name to the Israelites. 6:27a renders the blessing an election of the Israelites as God's people at every recitation (Seebass 42), as putting God's name upon the children of Israel recalls Dt 14:23-24, in which God's name is placed in the sanctuary He has chosen to anoint it as His. 6:27b emphasizes the agency of God in blessing the Israelites. It does not establish that God is the only one who can bless the Israelites - as mentioned in §1, David and Aaron both bless the people at other points in the HB, and 6:23a even seems to credit the Aaronites themselves with some blessing capabilities - rather, the Aaronites are conferred with the exclusive right to pronounce the blessing God Himself orders and fulfills. Seebass (43) compares this with a court scene, in which God's highest officials, the Aaronites, confer God's blessing by directing His face at the person to be blessed. This grants great priestly expertise and legitimacy to the Aaronites.

Seebass (43) notes a common comparison between Nb 6:22-27 and Ex 33:12-23, due to their shared concern with the revelation of God's name. In particular, Nb 6:25 is often compared with Ex 33:19 for their common juxtapositions of God's name and His graciousness. However, while Ex 33:19 is concerned with a people aware of their great guilt and in need of pity, Nb 6:25

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<sup>4</sup> While the dating of this blessing formula is not agreed upon, it is likely from around the time of the Deuteronomic reform (Seebass 51).

<sup>5</sup> Note that the text refers to both the Aaronites' and God's actions as blessing the people of Israel, thus seeming to give the Aaronites some agency in the process of blessing the people beyond merely bringing about God's blessing.

is not. While Nb 6:24-26 straightforwardly describes a simple and timeless blessing upon the elected people Israel by God through Aaronites, Ex 33:12-23 emphasizes the forgiveness required of the Israelites after their creation of the golden calf. However, considering Nb 6:27, the emphasis of the Numbers pericope seems to be on the election of God's people and his self-revelation, two themes also present in Ex 33:12-23 (Seebass 45).<sup>6</sup> Evidently, the framing of Nb 6:22-27 recalls several common Pentateuchal themes to heighten the blessing's importance.

### **3. Larger Context (Nb 1:1-10:10)**

The structure of Numbers is famously abstruse. Martin Noth wrote, "From the point of view of its contents, the book of Numbers lacks unity, and it is difficult to see any pattern in its construction" (quoted in Seebass 46). However, several analysts present theories as to the placement of Nb 6:22-27 within the early chapters of Numbers.

Horst Seebass argues that the whole of Nb 5-6 is unified by the topic of the role of priests, starting at v. 5:5. Verses 5:5-10 involve two priestly actions: a) offering a ram of atonement, and b) receiving the restitution and an additional fifth of the atonement if the object of the wrong is not alive and has no traceable heirs. 5:11-31, and 5:11-27 in particular, describe the role of the priest in determining the fate of a woman accused by her husband of adultery without any witnesses. 6:1-21 describe the Nazarite vow, with two particular roles for priests: a) ending the holy status of the Nazarite, and b) purifying the Nazarite in the case that he becomes impure by a person dying next to him. Each of these, Seebass argues, is a progressively greater valuation of priestly expertise, culminating with the pericope of 6:22-27 (Seebass 48). Seebass notes a connection with Nb 1-4, which also emphasize the expertise of the Aaronites, while Nb 7-8 the expertise of the Levites, aiming to juxtapose the two with the aim of heightening the legitimacy of the Levites, culminating with their consecration in 8:5-22. 7:89 seems to predate the rest of chapters 7 and 8 (Seebass 49-51), and functions similarly to the Levites as 6:22 does for the Aaronites: it legitimizes their holiness by indicating that God commanded it directly to Moses. Chapters 9 and 10, Seebass (51) argues, function as a postscript, culminating in the call to march of 9:15-10:10. In sum, Seebass sees the placement as functioning to a sequential heightening of the legitimacy of the Aaronites, followed by a similar passage consecrating the Levites, so as to create a self-standing section supporting the parallel institutions of priesthood, largely written by the priestly writer.

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<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, another difference between these passages is the treatment of God's face: in the Exodus pericope, God's face causes death; while in Nb 6:22ff, it confers blessing. Wilson (112, footnote 23) makes the point that the difference between Ex 33:20 and Nb 6:24-26 is that in the former, God is not the active agent in a person seeing the divine face; God can reveal His face as He desires, but can not be asked to do so. This argument seems contrived to me.

Jeremy Smoak makes a quite different argument as to the placement of the priestly blessing in a set of priestly laws. Firstly, he notices the bipartite structure of Nb 1:1-10:10. 1:1-4:49 describes the organization of the Israelite camp around the tabernacle, and 5:1-10:10 enunciates a final set of laws delivered by God to Moses at Sinai (Smoak 5). Within 5:1-10:10, Smoak outlines a sequence of pericopes (Figure 1). However, instead of interpreting the series through a theory of redaction or chronological sequence, Smoak sees the sequence as a “textual mapping of temple space,” immediately following a similar mapping of the space of the exterior camp (Smoak 16). Inspired by recent archaeological discoveries of inscriptions in temples, amulets, and other holy contexts of the Iron Age Levant, Smoak sees Nb 5-10:10 as the P writer constructing an indexed collective memory of the temple space and its associated blessings (Smoak 25). He notices that the spaces of the Nazirite’s votive offerings and of the dedicatory offerings for the altar were in close proximity with each other as well as with a temple’s dedicatory inscription, which may have resembled Nb 6:24-26 (Smoak 21, footnote 49). Thus, Smoak argues Nb 1-10 serves to relocate rituals and ritual spaces from the physical tabernacle and temple to the Torah text (Smoak 16-17). The relation between the index of memory in text and the organization of the actual temple does not suggest that the specific ordering was deliberate, but rather that the *memory* of the temple space is generally preserved in the text.

These two interpretations of the structure work in tandem to dispel Noth’s notion of early Numbers as the result of ad hoc organization of otherwise miscellaneous, unusable texts. Both Seebass and Smoak make convincing arguments for formal structures within Nb 1-10, and their arguments are not mutually exclusive. The redactor(s) likely had ideas about the priesthood and about ritual memory - in fact, the two seem rather organically connected. Given the evidently inter-religious sourcing of the Nb 6:24-26 blessing itself and the clear differences in authors both within the pericope (6:22-23a and 6:23b, 27) and immediately outside (7:1-88 and 7:89), it is impossible to argue that the surrounding chapters are entirely the work of one literary source. However, as we saw in §2 and §3, the use of multiple literary sources serves not to break up the passage into an incomprehensible agglomeration but to heighten the effect of the unified whole.

- A. Instructions to exclude the unclean (5:1–4)
- B. Laws of restitution (5:5–10)
- C. Case of the suspected adulteress (5:11–31)
- D. Law of the Nazirite vow (6:1–21)**
- E. Instructions for the priestly blessing (6:22–27)**
- F. Dedicatory offerings for the altar (7:1–89)**
- G. Instructions for the lamp stands (8:1–4)
- H. Consecration of the Levites (8:5–22)
- I. Age requirements for the Levites (8:23–26)
- J. Instructions for the Passover (9:1–14)
- K. Description of the tabernacle march (9:15–23)
- L. Instructions for the silver trumpets (10:1–10)

Figure 1: Sequence of pericopes in Nb 5:1-10:10 (Smoak 6).

## 4. Conclusion

Seebass (45) is right to refer to Nb 6:22-27 as a “jewel” - it is truly a climactic point of divine revelation and blessing in the Torah. The blessing itself includes a fascinating treatment of the revelation of God’s face, and builds intensity to a climax of an astounding divine promise of **שְׁלוֹם**. It is surrounded by a multi-source framing that establishes the blessing as the direct word of God and emphasizes the election of the Israelites as His people, thus increasing the holiness of the blessing proper. The surrounding chapters can be interpreted as a crescendo to the blessing and a diminuendo away from it, before a final fortissimo coda of trumpet calls in Nb 10:10. The HB is a very long composition, and effective moments require larger structures to make them work. One is not to throw one’s hands up in frustration when structure not immediately apparent; here, the fruits of formal analysis beyond the first step are great, revealing the sublimity of an already quite breathtaking passage.

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