

## The Meaning of “מַמְלַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים” in Exodus 19:6 Revisited

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### 1. Introduction

What does מַמְלַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים in Exodus 19:6 mean? There has been no scholarly consensus on the meaning of מַמְלַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים, a significant title for Israel. Should מַמְלַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים in Exodus 19:6 be read in the sense of Israel ruled by priests? Otherwise, a royal priesthood or a priestly kingdom? God declares Israel's unique role and identity in the expression, which is known to “suggest the peculiar nature of a history of Israel.”<sup>1)</sup> Echoes of מַמְלַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים are also found in the New Testament (Revelation 1:6 ‘βασιλείαν, ἱερεῖς’, 20:6 ‘ἔσονται ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ βασιλεύσουσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ’, 1 Peter 2:9 ‘βασιλείον ἱεράτευμα’). This designation of Israel has had a great influence on the protestant doctrine,<sup>2)</sup> and current liturgical discussions take “a kingdom of priests” to describe as a people worshipping God.<sup>3)</sup> But the meaning of this phrase is still disputed.<sup>4)</sup> This work begins with a review of the current debates

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1) Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 11.

2) R. B. Y. Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests (Exodus xix 6)”, *OTS* 8 (1950), 213.

3) Thomas J. Talley, ed., *A Kingdom of Priests: Liturgical Formation of the People of God* (Bramcote: Grove, 1988).

4) Scholars diverge into several options. For the recent views, see Georg Steins, “Priesterherrschaft, Volk von Priestern oder was sonst? Zur Interpretation von Ex 19,6”, *BZ* 49 (2001), 20-36; Henk Jagersma, “Structure and Function of Exodus 19:3b-6”, J. W. Dyk, et al., eds., *Unless Some One Guide Me* (Maastricht: Shaker, 2001), 43-48; Ludwig Schmidt, “Israel und das gesetz: Ex 19.3b-8 und 24.3-8 als literarischer und theologischer Rahmen für das Bundesbuch”, *ZAW* 113 (2001), 167-85; John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19:6*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament supplement series 395 (London: T&T Clark) 2004, 157-159; Arie Van der Kooij, “A

surrounding this expression and then evaluates the options in the light of the meanings of each word. The grammatical analysis of the construct in this work will offer a new contribution of its meaning. In addition, how can we properly translate it? It is also not apparent how to translate the phrase due to the unclear meaning of “מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים”. Accordingly, this work will consider the proper translation in the end of this study.

## 2. Literature Review

This phrase has a long history of interpretation beginning with the ancient versions, but ancient translations did not consistently translate it. This denotes that there was no consensus in antiquity on the meaning of “מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים”. The LXX translates it as βασιλειον ιεράτευμα that is, a kingly or royal priesthood. The Vulgate understands it as *regnum sacerdotale*, namely “a priestly kingdom.” and Targum Onkelos reads “kings, (and) priests” as separate positions.<sup>5)</sup> Rashbam understands “priests” to be nobles.<sup>6)</sup> Likewise in recent scholarship, the interpretations are many; but fall into three categories as: (1) Israel ruled by priests; (2) a kingdom set apart like priesthood; (3) a royal priesthood.

### 2.1. Israel ruled by priests

This phrase מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים can be used to identify a ruling priestly elite within Israel. William L. Moran argues that in Exodus 19:6, מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים and גּוֹי קְדוֹשׁ form the totality of Israel together. Consequently, מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים is a separate group from the general people and מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים refers to a regime of priests<sup>7)</sup>. Georg Fohrer contends that מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים implies that the rulers had the attribute of priests in the early era of Israel and the phrase could have originated in the Jerusalem

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Kingdom of Priests: Comments on Exo. 19:6”, R. Roukema, et al., eds., *The Interpretation of Exodus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 171-179.

5) I. Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary* (Denver: Ktav, 1990), 190.

6) Rashbam, *Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation*, M. I. Lockshin, trans. (Atlanta: Scholars, 2001), 202.

7) W. L. Moran, “A Kingdom of Priests”, J. L. McKenzie, ed., *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1962), 8-20.

priest tradition before the exile.<sup>8)</sup> On the other hand, Arie Van der Kooij also makes the case that this phrase means “a kingdom ruled by priests under the supreme direction of a king who is also a priest.”<sup>9)</sup> First of all, he shows *ἱεράτευμα* in LXX refers to “a particular and official group”, that is, a body of priests in LXX in distinction from *ἱερατεία* which denotes the priesthood in the sense of priestly office in LXX. He thinks that later understandings of this phrase support it as “leaders of the people”, not as a whole people. In other words, this phrase refers to the form of government of the people and the priesthood with royal status. He also suggests that Exodus 19:6 reflects a similar idea to dual kingship/priesthood of Melchizedek of Salem in Genesis 14:18. Similar political constitutions (priesthood with royal status) are found in Phoenician cities, such as Tyre and Sidon.<sup>10)</sup> However, though van der Kooij finds the origin of this phrase in the post-exilic era, it does not fit with the post-exilic situation that a kingdom of priests allows for the rule of a king who is also a priest.<sup>11)</sup> In addition, the concept of reigning priests fits with the context of Exodus 19.<sup>12)</sup> The primary concern in the context is the covenant with a collective people and it’s unfitting to the context that a priestly government is suddenly mentioned in the context of Israel being separated out of all nations for the covenant with YHWH.<sup>13)</sup>

## 2.2. A Kingdom Set Apart Like a Priesthood

This reading is called “the simplest reading of the text.”<sup>14)</sup> Scott suggested

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8) G. Fohrer, “Priesterliches Königtum(Ex 19,6)”, *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie und Geschichte (1949-1966)* (Berlin: Water de Gruyter, 1969), 151-152.

9) Van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 173-177.

10) Van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 175-178.

11) Frank Crüsemann, “Israel in der Perserzeit: Eine Skizze in Auseinandersetzung mit Max Weber”, W. Schluchter, ed., *Max Webers Sicht des antiken Christentums: Interpretation und Kritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 225.

12) Steins, “Priesterherrschaft”, 27.

13) R. B. Y. Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 217; Gowan also says, “I doubt that the two Hebrew words can support the idea that priestly rule is implied. Parallelism suggests the meaning ought to be similar to be similar to “holy nation”, D. E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical theology in the form of a commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 177; Davies calls this view the active-elite interpretation and says, “It is commonly held that vv. 3b-8 must in some way be an introduction to the theophany, yet, on the active-elite interpretation, these verses are seen as rather intrusive”, John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 81.

that this phrase describes Israel as a kingdom set apart like a priest among other nations. Just as the priesthood has a privileged position within a society, so Israel as a priestly kingdom is set apart from among all people<sup>15)</sup>. He says “this phrase simply designates Israel as worshippers of Yahweh, a positive counterpart of the idea of separation from the worship of other gods expressed in גוי קדוש”. And according to Houtman, ממלכת and גוי function as synonyms in 19:6.<sup>16)</sup> Furthermore, Houtmann argues that ממלכת and גוי קדוש are understood in terms of the term סגולה in 19:5. As priests occupy a privileged position with their own obligations compared to ordinary people, so Israel occupies a special position with their own duties and responsibilities, because they are a holy nation and distinct from the nations. Finally, he contends that this phrase refers to Israel’s unique position as a people in its entirety, not the position of the individual Israelite.

While Scott and Houtman contends that בהגים means “set apart among all people”,<sup>17)</sup> neither Scott nor Houtman takes into account בהגים, which occurs in Exodus 19:22 and provides an important hint about the meaning of בהגים in Exodus 19:6. Let us now review the final possible meaning – a royal priesthood.

### 2.3. A Royal Priesthood

John Davies understands the whole of Israel to be designated as ממלכת בהגים. He argues that Israel was given the divine grant of kingly authority, as found in ancient Near Eastern literature, but this perspective has been overlooked so far. Davies does not see this grant as separate from the grant of priesthood. He explains that royalty is the honorific status of Israel, and it makes Israel participate in the royal court of the divine king with reference to the priesthood. In this way, he accepts Martin Buber’s view that priesthood involves a secular meaning, related to a court office.<sup>18)</sup>

But we need to consider that in the general order of constructs, the second noun usually modifies the first, and so the reading of “a royal priesthood” is

14) D. E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 1994, 177.

15) R. B. Y. Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 218, 219.

16) C. Houtman, *Exodus* (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 445.

17) R. B. Y. Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 219.

18) John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 76-102.

unlikely.<sup>19)</sup> מַמְלַכַּת פְּהַגִּים stands in a parallel relationship to the second title “גֹּי קְדוֹשׁ”, and מַמְלַכַּת and גֹּי are observed as a common word pair in the Old Testament<sup>20)</sup> This supports the idea that מַמְלַכַּת functions as a noun, not an adjective. For this reason, a royal priesthood reading of this phrase cannot be sustained.

### 3. Meaning of Each Word

#### 3.1. Meaning of מַמְלַכַּת

Does “מַמְלַכַּת” mean “kingdom” or “king”? Moran and Fohrer argue that מַמְלַכַּת means “king.” Moran writes, “We can now point to a greater number of passages in which mamlaka most probably means ‘king, royalty’; and among them there are some in which mamlaka together with a goy constitutes a state.”<sup>21)</sup> He explains the evidences that are used to support the meaning of ‘king’ in the Old Testament. He explains from Jeremiah 1:15 that in the מַמְלָכוֹת of the North, the throne is made for a king, not for a kingdom, and represents royal authority. And in Psalm 135:11, the psalmist mentions the mighty kings such as king of the Amorites and the king of Bashan and finally, “מַמְלָכוֹת כְּנַעַן”. Moran argues that in this case, מַמְלָכוֹת undoubtedly refer to kings, not kingdoms, and he gives other examples (1Sa 10:18; 1Ki 5:1; 10:20; Isa 13:4; Jer 25:26; Amo 7:13; Psa 68:33; Lam 2:2; 2Ch 12:8; 17:10). Moreover he seeks from Phoenician inscriptions evidence that מַמְלָכָה and מֶלֶךְ are synonyms. For these reasons, it seems that מַמְלַכַּת includes the meaning of “king.”

Yet, it is not clear that all of these examples definitely mean “king”; *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* indicates that these “perhaps” mean king.<sup>22)</sup> However, the BDB lexicon does not even include this meaning of “king”<sup>23)</sup>.

19) J. B. Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), 50-52.

20) 1Sa 8:20; 1Ki 18:10; 2Ch 32:15; Psa 46:7; 105:13; Isa 13:4; 60:12; Jer 1:10; 18:7; Eze 37:22; Dan 8:22; Zep 3:8.

21) W. L. Moran, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 17.

22) David Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 331.

23) Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament is an exception, but they quote only

Though the term can be used to signify the occupant of the office, such a use is abnormal.<sup>24)</sup> Moreover, as Davies says, “If it is taken as a construct phrase, which is the most natural reading, the concrete reading ‘king’ will not suit, as ‘king(s) of priests’ yields little sense.”<sup>25)</sup> Contrary to Moran’s view, it is natural to understand מַמְלָכוֹת כְּנַעַן as nations of Canaan rather than kings of Canaan in Psalm 135:11.<sup>26)</sup> And it should be noted that in Psalm 105:13, מַמְלָכָה and גּוֹי are used not only as parallels but also as synonyms.<sup>27)</sup> Even Moran acknowledges this point.<sup>28)</sup> Thus, although the term may have the meaning of king, the context in Exodus 19 requires the meaning of kingdom. Therefore we can conclude מַמְלָכָה refers to kingdom.

### 3.2. Meaning of בְּהֵגִים

As with מַמְלָכָה, scholars diverge on the meaning of בְּהֵגִים,<sup>29)</sup> but there are two main interpretations – a literal meaning which refers to a priestly group among Israel, and a metaphorical meaning, which refers to the whole Israel. E. Schüssler Fiorenza discusses the basic meaning of בְּהֵגִים as people who are assigned in a sanctified area or who serve the deity.<sup>30)</sup> In other words, בְּהֵגִים is literally the group of the cultic officers in Israel.<sup>31)</sup> However, I will show that

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Caspari’s opinion and do not consider other’s.

24) William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenant* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 86.

25) John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary And Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19:6* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 78.

26) ESV, NKJV and NRSV adopt the reading “kingdoms of Canaan.”

27) Steins, “Priesterherrschaft”, 26.

28) “Against Caspari the principal objection has been that the comparison with Phoenician mmlkt is irrelevant, because in biblical Hebrew mamlaka does not mean king”; W. L. Moran, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 11.

29) E. Schüssler Fiorenza organizes the possible meanings into four sorts. First, בְּהֵגִים can mean the separated and chosen people from other nations. Secondly, it can stand for the priestly function of Israel as a mediator and a servant for all nations. Thirdly, it can indicate the accent and superiority about Israel’s access to Yahweh as priests can approach Him. Fourthly, בְּהֵגִים can be a synonym of קָדְוָה and be understood as a sanctified worshipper of Yahweh or the bigger intensity of holiness of Israel; E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott: Studien zum Herrschafts- und Priestermotiv in der Apokalypse* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1972), 115-117.

30) Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott*, 114.

31) *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* explains it means “usually Israelite cultic officials of

כֹּהֲנִים in Exodus 19:6 can be used in a metaphorical sense for two reasons.

First, it does not fit the context that a specific group among Israel is abruptly mentioned, so a literal meaning of כֹּהֲנִים in Exodus 19:6 (cultic officers) is unlikely. It is obvious that Exodus 19:4-6 is a proclamation for the whole of Israel according to 19:3b (וַתִּגֵּד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). Mentioning the polity or cultic group does not fit in the context of the proclamation of the privileges and obligations of the whole of Israel.

Secondly, though Van der Kooij argues כֹּהֲנִים cannot be used metaphorically and that “there is no parallel of such a use of כֹּהֲנִים elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible”,<sup>32)</sup> כֹּהֵן is used in the Old Testament as a title of honor which refers to the king’s sons and to high court-officials, and none of these had any special relationship to the cult. In this sense, we can understand the Israelites are called “priests” and that they are intimate friends of the king Yahweh in Exodus 19:6.<sup>33)</sup> In 1 Kings 4:5, Zabud who is Nathan’s son is called כֹּהֵן רֵעֵה הַמֶּלֶךְ (a priest, the king’s friend). As well, in 2 Samuel 8:18, it should be noted that David’s sons are called priests (וּבָנָיו דָּוָד כֹּהֲנִים הָיוּ).<sup>34)</sup> One might read this text as proof that kings of Israel held the office of a priest.<sup>35)</sup> But in 1 Samuel 13:8-14, Saul, a king of Israel, is denied the office of a priest; rather, he was strongly denounced for his cultic behavior by Samuel and disqualified for kingship. Accordingly, we can conclude that כֹּהֵן can hold a secular and metaphorical meaning in the Old Testament<sup>36)</sup> and that it can refer to a high court-officer or

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Yahweh offering sacrifice.”, David Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol 2, 364.

32) Van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 176.

33) Buber says, “the word kohanim, which usually means priests, is synonymous, where it describes a secular court office, with “the first at the hand of the king:, or with companion, adjutant”. Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946), 106; “Israel as a ‘kingdom of priests,’ could not be adopted, because in the Exodus passage kohanim simply means ‘direct servants,’ while Deuteronomy its meaning is naturally the sacred position of sanctuary officers”. Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper, 1960), 160; Schüssler Fiorenza refutes this view, contending that it could be only a honored title or David’s sons might have served the cults and especially the author might have regarded it as a technical term. But there is no evidence that is used as an honored title and David’s son were related to the cult in the Old Testament.

34) LXX also interprets קְדוֹשֵׁי as chiefs of the court (ἀρχαί).

35) Gordon J. Wenham, “Were David’s Sons Priests?”, *ZAW* 87 (1975), 79-82; Carl Edwin Armerding, “Was David’s Sons really Priests?”, Gerald F. Hawthorne, ed., *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by his Former Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 85.

an intimate friend of a king. In the same manner, we can metaphorically understand מְהַנִּיחַ in Exodus 19:6.

#### 4. Grammatical Analysis of מְהַנִּיחַ מַמְלָכָה

Now that the meanings of מְהַנִּיחַ and מַמְלָכָה have been explained, we turn to analyzing the relationship between these two words in the construct form. If this phrase is obviously a construct form, it can be understood as a sort of genitive.<sup>37)</sup> Therefore, the most important question should be what kind of genitive this is, because this determines the meaning of the phrase. Possible genitive meanings can be divided into three categories: (1) genitive of agency (a kingdom with priests as rulers); (2) genitive of quality (a royal priesthood); (3) attributive genitive (a priestly kingdom).<sup>38)</sup>

36) “As the priesthood meant a variety of things and exercised a range of functions, it will be necessary to ask which particular aspect or aspects of priesthood may be intended by the use of the word in Exo 19.6”, John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 91.

37) One can think מַמְלָכָה is absolute because many ancient readers chose not only as a construct form (of the usual absolute מַמְלָכָה) but also as an absolute such as readings of the Syriac Peshitta (kingdom and priests), Targums (kings (and) priests) and *Jub* 16:18. Among modern interpreters, J. B. Bauer rejects the general understanding in favor of a construct. He presents the similar cases in the Old Testament. For example, he argues “אַיִלַת אֲהָבִים וְיַעֲלֶת־תָּהּ” (a loving doe, a grace deer) in Proverbs 5:19 has absolute noun + absolute noun - absolute noun + adjective structure just like מַמְלָכָה מְהַנִּיחַ // גֵּי קָדוֹשׁ in Exodus 19:6. But “אַיִלַת” should be understood as a construct and each pair of “loving doe, a graceful deer” can be regarded as construct relations most naturally. He also presents two other examples in Psalm 48:17 and Zechariah 1:13. But both of these cases are ambiguous. A possible alternative explanation is that each pair is introduced by a plural construct followed by an enclitic mem, as Davies points out. Therefore we can conclude that each example which Bauer presents does not provide proofs for his argument and that מַמְלָכָה מְהַנִּיחַ is finally a construct form. See J. B. Bauer, “Könige und Priester, ein heiliges Volk (Ex 19, 6)”, *BZ* 2 (1958), 283-286; John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 83.

38) But Steins suggests 5 possible genitive meanings as following: (1) genitive of agency: a kingdom with priests as rulers; (2) genitive of quality: a royal priesthood; (3) objective genitive: the royal ruling over priests or a kingdom having priests; (4) attributive genitive: a priestly kingdom; (5) genitive of genus: a kingdom which priests belong to. (Steins, “Priesterherrschaft”, 23-24.) But we can more narrow down the possible genitive meaning into (1), (2) and (4) because (3) and (5) are seldom supported by contemporary scholars. If we accept objective genitive view (3), means “a body of priests subject to kingly rule or a kingdom possessing a legitimate priesthood.” But this view should be rejected for the reason following. Scott explains that first of all, this view is not fit for the context, “where Israel collectively as a



#### 4.1. Genitive Of Agency (A Kingdom With Priests As Rulers)

If we understand this phrase as a genitive of agency, it refers to a priestly group within Israel identified as a ruling priestly elite. Moran argues that מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֻיִם and גֹּי קְדוֹשׁ are complementary to each other in their relationship and that the two together refer to the totality of Israel.<sup>39)</sup> Van der Kooij argues that in terms of מַמְלַכַּת עֹג (the kingdom of Og) in Num 32:13 and Deuteronomy 3:13, מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֻיִם more likely points to the leaders of the people. In this case, מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֻיִם is the genitive of agency to מַמְלַכָּה. And Moran argues that מַמְלַכָּה and גֹּי constitute one nation in Jeremiah 18:7-8, 27:7-8. But this cannot be the only an alternative. In Jeremiah 18:7-8 and 27:7-8, גֹּי can be understood as the whole national entity and מַמְלַכָּה and גֹּי as synonyms.<sup>40)</sup> Indeed, they occur together and are interchangeable terms in Psalm 105:13 and 1 Chronicles 16:20.<sup>41)</sup>

However, the context of Exodus 19:4-6 does not support this reading. מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֻיִם is the privilege as the result of obedience to the conditional clause, “If you hear my voice and keep my covenant”, and it is implausible that the covenantal privilege is the political constitution of a government under the priestly leaders.<sup>42)</sup> On the contrary, Van der Kooij argues that 19:6 is not related

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people or kingdom is contrasted with other peoples, not her priesthood with theirs”, and the royal ruling over priests cannot convey the notion of fellowship with YHWH in the covenantal context, Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 217. And the genitive of genus view (5) includes the idea that all of citizens individually have the right of direct approach to God. This view is supported by Revelation 1:6, 5:9-10 and 20:6. But this view cannot be sustained in that the primary interest in the context is the covenant as made with a collective body, “the house of Jacob....the children of Israel (v.3)”, not individually in Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 217; “The point is Israel’s unique position as a people in its entity to God (cf. 19:3b, 5), not the position of the individual Israelite. The notion of the universal priesthood of believers lies outside the horizon of Exo. 19”, Houtman, *Exodus II*, 446.

39) W. L. Moran, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 13.

40) Davies observes, “Synonymous parallelism would even appear to be the simplest explanation of such passages as Jer 29:18, 51:20 and Psa 46:7, where the remaining terms in each hemistich are synonymously parallel”, John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 80.

41) Houtman says, “Apart from the question whether מַמְלַכָּה can mean “king” in Hebrew – doubtful in my view – it should be noted that the duality ruler(s)-ruled ill fits the subject “you”, and leads to a strained interpretation”, in Houtman, *Exodus II*, 445.

42) The supporters of this view seeks the grounds of the argument in historical reconstruction of this text. But this text should be understood in the final form. Cf, “Modern scholars have, I believe, failed to do justice to this passage, and that for two reasons. On the one hand, they have been unable to agree on its literary source, which has in turn hampered them in its interpretation. On the other hand, in their obsession with historical origins and parallels, they

to the conditional clause in 19:5, and that 19:6 introduces a new aspect to organize the people of YHWH as a political entity - the ruler and the ruled.<sup>43)</sup> He suggests the structure of 4-6 as below.

- v. 4 אַתֶּם רֹאֲיֹתֶם  
 v. 5 וְעַתָּה אֲסֹמְנוּ תִשְׁמְעוּ  
 v. 6 וְאַתֶּם תְּהִיֹּלֵי

Van der Kooij argues that this whole structure denotes that it begins with the use of the plural pronoun אַתֶּם, as in 19:4, and that 19:6 syntactically does not belong to the sentence of 19:5. The focus of 19:5 is the status of Israel among other nations, and this sentence is completed with the last clause - “for all the earth is mine.” Van der Kooij also contends that 19:6 begins the new focus, which is a new statement about organizing the people of God. Finally, he thinks that mentioning a specific group among Israel fits the context.<sup>44)</sup>

However, Van der Kooij overlooks the parallel of the verb הִיָּה in 19:5 and 6. He mentions that the element הִיָּה is common to both verses, but he insists the setting between the two verses is different, although how the setting is different is unclear in his article.<sup>45)</sup> Yet, he misses the inverted parallel structure of 19:5-6 as below.<sup>46)</sup>

- וְהִיָּיתֶם לִי סֹגְלָה A  
 מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים B  
 כִּי־לִי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ B'  
 וְאַתֶּם תְּהִיֹּלֵי מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ A'

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have overlooked its significance within the present arrangement of Exodus”, John W. Kleinig, “On Eagles’ Wing: An Exegetical Study of Exodus 19:2-8”, *Lutheran Theological Journal* 21 (1987), 18.

43) Van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 177.

44) Along with his syntactical argumentation, he deals with early reception history of the text such as LXX, 2 Maccabees and Targumim, and historical arguments in his article. But these arguments are beyond the range of this paper.

45) He only says, “it makes sense to have Hebrew term סֹגְלָה combined with the phrase ‘among all peoples’, but this does not apply to the expressions of v. 6. This verse bears upon the people of Israel as a political entity (גוֹי), with a particular emphasis on the issue of its constitution (מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהֹנִים)”, Van der Kooij, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 177.

46) John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 59; Wells suggests the similar structure. See Wells, *God’s Holy people*, 47.

This chiasmus makes the relationship between סגלה and ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש clearer. סגלה in A corresponds to ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש in A', while כל-העמים בל-העמים pairs up with כל-הארץ in B-B'. That is, סגלה and ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש do not refer to different objects. This structure is plausible because this chiasmus clearly shows the parallel of ליה between A-A' and כל of between B-B'. In this chiasmus, Israel is positioned on either end with the verb יהיה. This chiasmus can explain the complicated structure in 19:3-6 better than Van der Kooij's, and we can conclude that 19:5 and 19:6 are not separate. Likewise Jagersma explains:<sup>47)</sup>

The two instructions in verse 5a are, therefore, not only textually but also functionally at the center of the LORD's speech....If, therefore, on the basis of the Lord's three acts referred to in the first series (v. 4), the Israelites carry out the two instructions of verse 5a, they will be able to function completely according to the three characterizations mentioned in the third series (vv. 5b-6a).

That is to say, if Israel keeps the two requirements of listening to God's voice and covenant, Israel can function according to three characterizations, namely, סגלה, ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש and גוי קדוש. These characterizations of Exodus 19:5b, 6a are subordinate to the two instructions in verse 5a,<sup>48)</sup> and this gives us the foundation against the interpretation of כהנים as a specific group separated from general people. Therefore, we can conclude that כהנים is not a separate group from גוי, and that ממלכת כהנים is not a genitive of agency.

## 4.2. Genitive of Quality (A Royal Priesthood)

The genitive of quality denotes that the first term of the chain has the quality of the second term,<sup>49)</sup> and this is a plausible reading in Exodus 19:6 based on the ancient Near Eastern context and the Sinai pericope.<sup>50)</sup> This interpretation would

47) Henk Jagersma, “Structure and Function of Exodus 19:3b-6”, 48.

48) Rudolf Mosis, “Ex 19, 5b, 6a: Syntaktischer Aufbau und lexikalische Semantik”, *BZ* 22 (1978), 7.

49) Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 145.

mean that Israel has not only a priestly but also kingly function among other nations. However, it is doubtful that *ממלכת* can contain the meaning of royalty in Exodus 19:6, because it is semantically located in the same field as *גוי*, and they are a common word pair in the Old Testament.<sup>51)</sup> Furthermore, in Exodus 19:6, this interpretation misses the parallel with *גוי קדוש*. As Fohrer notes,<sup>52)</sup> *בהגים* (the modifier) corresponds to *קדוש* (the modifier), and *ממלכת* (the modified) to *גוי* (the modified). It is the most natural to say that *ממלכת* and *גוי* have the same nominal function as the modified in terms of the fact that *ממלכת* and *גוי* are a common word pair in the Old Testament. Therefore the parallel between *ממלכת בהגים* and *גוי קדוש* is evidence against the view of genitive of quality.

#### 4.3. Attributive Genitive: A Priestly kingdom

Interpreting *ממלכת בהגים* as an attributive genitive is the view most suitable to the context. As *גוי* is qualified by *קדוש*, so *ממלכת* is qualified by *בהגים* (a plural of abstraction).<sup>53)</sup> This appears to be the simplest understanding of grammar. Scott argues that *ממלכת בהגים* means “a kingdom set apart like a priest.”<sup>54)</sup> His analysis mainly depends on synonymous or conceptual parallelism with *גוי קדוש*. If *ממלכת בהגים* and *גוי קדוש* have the same meaning, they constitute synonymous parallelism. Stephen Geller explains the members of synonymous parallelism “belong to semantic paradigms the numbers of which are essentially interchangeable logically.”<sup>55)</sup> According to Geller’s definition, *בהגים* and *קדוש* should be interchangeable in support of synonymous parallelism. But the meaning of *בהגים* denotes the broad meaning in the Sinai pericope. Wells points out that priesthood in Exodus means “distinctive to the Nation of Israel”, “Covenant Identity of God’s people”, “drawing near to God like Moses”, “holy to YHWH”, “Acting on behalf of Israel”, “to serve the cult as YHWH commanded” and “revealing YHWH’s holiness.”<sup>56)</sup> *בהגים* is used as “holy to

50) John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 93, 170-188.

51) Psa 46:7; 79:6; 102:23; 105:13; 2 Chr 16:20; 1 Kgs 18:10; Isa 60:12; Neh 9:22.

52) Georg Fohrer, “Priesterliches Königtum”, 151.

53) Rudolf Mosis, “Ex 19,5b, 6a”, 21.

54) R. B. Y. Scott, “A Kingdom of Priests”, 218.

55) Stephen A. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979), 34.

56) Jo Bailey Wells, *God’s Holy People*, 50-51.

YHWH”(e.g., 29:44), but it cannot be confined into solely that meaning. Therefore we can conclude פְּהֵנִים and קְדוֹשׁ are not interchangeable in Exodus and so this point enables readers to conclude that מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֵנִים and גֹּי קְדוֹשׁ are not synonymous parallelism. Geller suggests semantic parallelism includes synonym, list, antonym, merism, epithet, proper noun, pronoun, whole-part or part-whole, concrete-abstract or abstract-concrete, numerical, identity, and metaphor. In these categories, מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֵנִים and גֹּי קְדוֹשׁ is the list. Geller defines the list as the semantic parallelism whose members belong to a type of paradigm that members of this category “are related by an understood common denominator and are not logically interchangeable, even in the most general way.”<sup>57)</sup> Therefore, this parallelism should be regarded not as synonymous parallelism, but as *a list* according to Geller’s category.

The meaning of “פְּהֵנִים” should be defined in the adjacent context. The background of Exodus 19:3-8 is the covenant story with YHWH and the introduction of Exodus 19-24 which proclaims the unique privilege of Israel and emphasize their binding with YHWH.<sup>58)</sup> “מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֵנִים” is one of the analogies about it. It should be considered that “מַמְלַכַּת פְּהֵנִים” points to the relation between YHWH and Israel, and denotes the special feature of Israel, their closeness to God (Nähe zu Gott). Let us look at Exodus 19:22a:

וְגַם הַפְּהֵנִים הַנִּגְשִׁים אֶל־יְהוָה Exo 19:22a

We trace the meaning of Israel’s priestliness with this feature in this verse. That is, Israel is the priestly kingdom in that it is near to God and hears his voice,<sup>59)</sup> as we find a similar idea in Isaiah 60-62.<sup>60)</sup> As Wells observes,<sup>61)</sup> “The essence of the role of priest is to draw near to YHWH.” Thus we should not overlook the priestly role to have an access to YHWH and it’s an important

57) Geller, *Parallelism*, 35.

58) Georg Steins, “Priesterherrschaft”, 28-32.

59) According to Buber, פְּהֵנִים in Exo 19:6 signifies the intimate of YHWH. See Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 160.

60) Cf. Isa 61:6 “But you shall be called priests of YHWH.”

61) Jo Bailey Wells, *God’s Holy People*, 51. She also writes, “Moses is the most ‘priestly’ of all. This status is measured by the extent of the access priests are given in ‘drawing near’ to YHWH and thus responsibility they take in the role of mediating between YHWH and his people.”

conception of priesthood in Sinai periscope and the priestliness of Israel in Exodus 19:6 can be understood in this context. Therefore, we conclude that this construct uses the attributive genitive (a priestly kingdom). That is, Israel is the kingdom which has a priestly attribute. However, in contrast to Scott and Houtman’s view, “מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים” should be understood as “a kingdom near to God, not a kingdom set apart from the nations”.

## 5. Translation

מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים in Exodus 19:6 has been translated by current English versions as follows:

Versions	Translations
KJV	a kingdom of priests
RSV	a kingdom of priests
NIV	a kingdom of priests
NRSV	a priestly kingdom
NKJV	a kingdom of priests
NLT	my kingdom of priests
NASV	a kingdom of priests
ESV	a kingdom of priests

As shown above, מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים is usually translated into a kingdom of priests except for NRSV and NLT. The dynamic equivalence translation such as NIV literally reads the phrase as a kingdom of priests and NLT adds “my” to kingdom of priests. However, this work argues that, in the dynamic equivalence translation, מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים in Exodus 19:6 should be translated into “a priestly kingdom” or “a kingdom near to God” since “a priestly kingdom” or “a kingdom near to God” is the translation which clearly indicates that מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים is the attributive genitive. מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים does not refer to a royal priesthood or Israel ruled by priests, but means the kingdom which has a priestly attribute, as discussed above. Thus, “a priestly kingdom” or “a kingdom near to God” is the

most suitable translation, particularly for the dynamic equivalence translation.

## 6. Conclusion

After reviewing the current debates about this issue, ממלכת was shown to be better read as kingdom, not as kings. Furthermore, the metaphorical meaning of כהנים, not as a specific group in Israel but as the whole of Israel, was shown to be best. Synthesizing these two meanings, therefore, it is concluded that the relationship between two words is attributive genitive, and so ממלכת כהנים can be read as a priestly kingdom. Specifically, a priestly kingdom means not a kingdom set apart from all peoples, but a kingdom near to God. In addition, a priestly kingdom or a kingdom near to God is the most suitable interpretation and translation of ממלכת כהנים.

### <Keywords>

Exodus 19:6, a Kingdom of priests, Grammatical analysis, Biblical parallelism.

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<Abstract>

## The Meaning of “ממלכת כהנים” in Exodus 19:6 Revisited

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This study explores the meaning of “ממלכת כהנים” in Exodus 19:6, and considers its proper translation. “ממלכת כהנים” have been interpreted in various senses in the ancient and modern interpretation history. In the contemporary scholarly views, the interpretation falls into three categories. First, it is interpreted in the sense of “a kingdom ruled by priests”. Secondly, it is read as a priestly kingdom or a kingdom set apart from the nations. Thirdly, some scholars read it as “a royal priesthood”. William Moran and Georg Fohrer argue that “ממלכת” means “kings”, not “kingdom”. However, if we read it as “kings”, the meaning of the construct would be rather confusing (kings of priests). Rather, “גוי” and “ממלכת” should be regarded as a common word pair which refers to the same entity (Israel). Moreover, scholars in favour of “a kingdom ruled by priests” take the meaning of “כהנים” as literal (i.e., the cultic officers), not as figurative. Arie Van der Kooij contends that “כהנים” was not figuratively employed in the OT. However, we find metaphorical usage of “כהנים” in 2 Kings 4:5 and 2 Samuel 8:18. Furthermore, Moran and van der Kooij maintain that כהנים ממלכת and גוי קדוש form the totality of Israel together and that ממלכת כהנים refers to leaders of Israel. However, in the context of the covenantal privilege in Exodus 19, it would seem that designating the political entity for Israel does not fit with the context. Rather, “ממלכת כהנים” should be interpreted as attributive genitive which refers to the privileged status of Israel among the nations. Yet, כהנים does not mean “holy”. In the context of Exodus 19:22, “כהנים” may indicate the feature of priests who can approach near to God. Therefore, “ממלכת כהנים” refers to Israel’s covenantal status as a kingdom near to God. In addition, the proper translation of “ממלכת כהנים” should be a priestly kingdom or a kingdom near to God.