Having treated portrayals of otherworldly priesthood as they appear in the non-sectarian corpus, we are ready to approach the Qumran document that, by far, contains the most extensive such portrayal, the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. As we shall see below, the provenance of this cryptic text is not entirely clear. However, it is apparent that the Qumranites valued it highly and made liturgical use of it. It thus may be said to reflect Qumranite religious practice and belief. The present chapter looks at the depiction of otherworldly priesthood in the Songs and the theological notions implied by it. It also assesses the current debate in the field about how these ideas reflect on the nature of the spirituality of the Qumran community.

Prefatory Remarks

According to most scholars, the notions of angelic priesthood and celestial temple at Qumran belong to a larger cosmology, with deep roots in broader Jewish apocalyptic thought, as well as in biblical and broader ancient Near Eastern religion. This worldview envisions the universe as a horizontal duality in which the heavenly and earthly realms mirror one another. According to this perspective, there is a direct parallelism between the existence and actions of heavenly beings and those of their human counterparts on earth. It is important to note that at Qumran this notion is situated within an all-encompassing vertical duality between the forces of good (God, the beneficent angels, and the “sons of light”) on the one hand and the evil powers (Belial, the wicked spirits, and the “sons of darkness”) on the other.¹ The former are represented by righteousness,
purity, and light while the latter are represented by wickedness, impurity, and darkness. As asserted by the Treatise of the Two Spirits (1QS 3:13–4:26), humanity is divided into sons of light and sons of darkness, and each group is allotted to the corresponding angelic host, led by the Prince of Lights and the Angel of Darkness/Belial respectively. The gulf between the heavenly and earthly realms is traversed by communion with angels, as found in several sectarian texts. Such communion appears to be manifest in two directions, with both the presumption and expectation of humans ascending and angels descending. As has often been noted, this latter phenomenon especially necessitated elevated standards of ritual purity within the community.

Scholars have seized on the Qumran community’s view of the heavens and earth as parallel realms, turning it into a key interpretive paradigm for explaining all manners of the community’s worldview and behavior. However, the question of exactly what the various images of the angelic priesthood contained in sectarian documents mean for understanding the earthly community at Qumran is under debate. The discussion has generally focused on the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, as it provides the most detailed and explicit portrait of the angelic priesthood and the celestial temple not only at Qumran, but in all of Second Temple Jewish literature. We will turn to this debate below, after briefly introducing and treating the text.

---

2 Whether or not this source was composed at Qumran, its inclusion into 1QS reveals the importance of its dualistic themes for the community.

3 For human ascent, see, e.g., 1QH α 11:20–23, 14:15–16; 1QSb 3:25–26, 4:24–26; 4Q491 11 I. For angelic descent, see, e.g., 1QM 1:10–11; 12:1–9; 1QS 11:7–8; 1QSa 2:8–9. M. Weinfeld (“The Heavenly Praise in Unison” in Normative and Sectarian Judaism in the Second Temple Period [LSTS 54; T & T. Clark International: New York, 2005], 48) notes that the common lot of the Qumranites and the angels is expressed in three ways in sectarian literature: joining together in praise, sharing a common fate (eternal life), and taking part in holy war together.

4 See, e.g., 1QM 7:6; cf. 4QD and 4QFlor 1–2 I, 4.