CHAPTER SIX
THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PRIESTHOOD

Predictably, the roots of the Qumranite vision of eschatological/messianic priesthood are to be found in the Hebrew Bible. Leviticus assigns various cultic acts to the anointed priest, הַכְּהָנִיםְּ הָמֳשָׁא (4:3, 5, 16; 6:15). Daniel refers to historical high priests with the word מֶשָּא (9:25–26).1 Moreover, the split reflected in the Qumran texts between lay and sacerdotal eschatological authority is prefigured by the diarchy of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the “two sons of oil” of the early restoration community mentioned in Zechariah 4.2 Scholars also point to such passages as Jer 33:14–26, where levitical priests are elevated beside the king.3 However, none of these biblical texts refer to an anointed priest in the sense of a future messianic figure. In the previous chapter, we observed how Num 24:17 and Deut 33:8–11 were applied by the Qumranites to such a personage; but exegesis of these verses alone does not account for the invention of a priestly messiah. Indeed, the Qumranites show themselves perfectly capable of interpreting “obvious” messianic passages non-messianically.4 It is therefore clear that such interpretation was not required by a close reading of the text. Rather, it involved a conscious choice and reflects the attitudes and perceptions of the interpreters. In particular, the Qumranite expectation of an ideal priestly figure who would arrive in the future reflects the community’s expressed dissatisfaction with the current exercise of the sacerdotal office in Jerusalem and its dismay with the

3 Cf. 1 Chr 29:22, where Solomon and Zadok are anointed simultaneously. For a survey of possible biblical foundations for the Qumranite priestly messiah expectation, see J. Villalôn, “Sources vétéro-testamentaires de la doctrine qumranienne des deux messies,” RevQ 29 (1972): 54–69. See also Caquot, “Le Messianisme qumrânien,” 232–234.
4 For example, in CD 7:16–17, the “king” of Amos 5:26 is interpreted as the “congregation.” In 4QFlorilegium 1:19, the “anointed one” of Ps 2:2 is interpreted as the plural “chosen ones.” See further Collins, “The Nature of Messianism,” 216–217.
resulting pollution of the temple. With the arrival of the priestly messiah, who would teach the new law to, preside over, and possibly atone for the purified cultic community, this situation would be rectified.  

In hopes of elucidating the roots of the Qumranite notion of end-time priesthood, we shall investigate both its historical and traditional textual roots. In the present chapter we shall treat the former, the historical context in which the belief flourished. First, we will briefly consider the political history of the priesthood in Second Temple society. Then, the bulk of the chapter will deal with the religious-historical background of the Qumranite representations of end-time priesthood. In chapter seven, we shall turn to the traditional sources that likely lay behind such portrayals. As we shall see, the combination of these two factors goes a long way in explaining the development of the image of eschatological priesthood at Qumran.

**Political-Historical Roots: The Shift to Priestly and Scribal Authority**

Second Temple period Judah witnessed a dramatic paradigm shift with respect to political structure. With the dissolution of the Davidic dynasty, power swung from the royal palace toward the rebuilt Jerusalem temple, which became the command center of the restored Judahite community. The Persian period saw the rise of a diarchic form of government, consisting of a lay governor and a high priest, both of whom, of course, were subordinate to foreign rule. Although the evidence is sparse for this period, it appears that the lay leader governed civil affairs while the priest attended to cultic matters. By the early Hellenistic period, however, we have evidence that the high priest was exercising political power without the assistance of a civil governor. Since the Hellenistic empires did not

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6 To be sure, the first two governors of Yehud, Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar, were Davidides, but the Persians appear to have discontinued this policy for fear of arousing the nationalistic hopes of the Judahite community. See Himelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests*, 34. For the government of the province of Yehud in the early Persian period, see L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 73–79.
