Chapter Eight

Summary and Conclusions

Summary

The present inquiry began with the observation that the current trend in the study of Qumran priesthood has been to peruse the Dead Sea Scrolls for evidence of socio-historical realities. Considering the cryptic, clichéd, and theologically charged nature of the Scrolls corpus, the difficulty of obtaining such historical information was duly noted. Following the suggestion of Kugler, I proposed a shift in focus away from the historical realities of priesthood at Qumran, and toward a more approachable topic given the nature of the evidence: the portrayal of priesthood throughout the community's literature. As such, this study focused on central and pervasive literary representations of priesthood in the Qumran library, with the primary objective of illuminating the theological notions implied by them. As expected, this line of inquiry has not revealed much about the socio-historical realities of priesthood at Qumran. However, since the texts examined encode something of the nature of their authors as well as that of the people who read and revered them, much was learned about the character of the Qumran community.

Part one treated representations of otherworldly priesthood, defined as one or both of two distinct conceptions: angels as priests serving before God in the cosmic temple, and elevated human priests likened to angels. Comparison of non-sectarian and sectarian portrayals of otherworldly priesthood served as a window into the distinct nature of the Qumran community and its relationship with broader segments of Second Temple Judaism.

In the non-sectarian collection, such depictions occur in works of differing provenance and genre, but often exhibit close thematic and linguistic affinities. Angelic priests are envisioned as cultic ministers serving before God in the celestial temple. In addition, they sometimes serve as intercessors, and bring about the purification of the cosmos by means of their violent eradication of sin. Elevated human priests are frequently
portrayed as separated from “all flesh.” They may access and distribute supernal knowledge, and they emanate a brilliant radiance/glory. This dazzling light represents a manifestation of the divine presence on earth and underscores the human priest’s exalted status, as well as his role as intermediary between celestial and terrestrial realms. The fact that these portrayals appear in several non-sectarian documents of varying origins and character testifies to the prevalence of the notion of otherworldly priesthood beyond the confines of Qumran and in the broader stream of Second Temple Judaism. This conclusion is supported by the appearance of related motifs in Hellenistic Jewish works not preserved at Qumran.

The liturgical depictions of otherworldly priesthood in SSS may well be of non-sectarian origins, but they relate closely to those found in surely sectarian documents. Indeed, the existence of at least nine copies at Qumran indicates that it was utilized by community members. The composition may thus be studied as a reflection of Qumranite religious belief and practice.

SSS exhibits a notable tension in its conception of otherworldly priesthood. On the one hand, the language used to describe the angelic priests parallels that used elsewhere in sectarian literature to describe the earthly Qumran community, resulting in an ontological proximity between heavenly and earthly sacerdotalists. On the other hand, at least one passage (4Q400 2 6–7) shows an acute awareness of the disparate natures of the angelic and human priests. This tension is explained by consideration of the epistemological mechanism implicit in SSS’s vision of otherworldly priesthood and the cosmic temple. The experience of the cosmic temple provided by SSS may well have served a compensatory function for Qumranite priests who found themselves distanced from their earthly source of power and legitimacy. However, it is a mistake to explain the origins of the celestial temple vision of SSS solely as a fanciful projection into heaven by earthly priests in crisis. Indeed, the symbol of the unprofanable temple existing beyond the plane of history goes back to Ezekiel and may be found in prominent non-sectarian works such as the Temple Scroll and New Jerusalem. A similar image of the temple lies at the mythic roots of the vision of SSS. As such, it appears that rather than projecting earthly realities into heaven, SSS envisions the archetypal image of the temple as the blueprint for construction of the terrestrial community. It is this imaginal mechanism which infuses the earthly temple and priesthood at Qumran with vitality, nourishing the imperfect fallen temple below with the image of the ideal temple above.