Priests of Qoreb: Linguistic Enigma and Social Code in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice

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Introduction

The liturgical composition known as the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice is one of the most enigmatic works discovered among the Dead Sea scrolls. To be sure, its state of preservation is considerably better than that of many other works, due to the presence of nine or ten copies; fragmentary as they are, they overlap in many passages, a fact that allowed Carol Newsom to reconstruct much of the work in her admirable edition. This reconstruction enabled her and subsequent scholars to account for the literary structure of the work as being composed of thirteen songs, and to expose its somewhat esoteric or even mystical contents.

The most baffling aspect of the Songs, however, remains its language. Although its entire inventory of lexical items and grammatical forms is attested elsewhere in QH or other corpora, in this composition they are boldly combined into unique phrases and seemingly wild syntactic constructions that are often so exceptional as to verge on unintelligible. A reader may be relieved to at last encounter a clause with what appears to be a comprehensive

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2 Hebrew corpora are abbreviated throughout this paper as follows: BH = Biblical Hebrew, divided to classical (CBH) and late (LBH) phases; QH = Qumran Hebrew; MH = Mishnaic Hebrew, referring especially to the language used by the early Rabbis, the Tannaim. LBH, QH, and MH comprise the main literary corpora that testify to Second Temple Hebrew, although it is acknowledged that they do not completely overlap in terms of their exact time, literary status, or social register. Quotations from rabbinic literature are taken from Ma’agarim, the online database of the Historical Dictionary of the Academy of Hebrew Language (http://hebrew-treasures.huji.ac.il/), with references to the standard editions of the rabbinic works cited. Translations from the Hebrew Bible take their cue from the NRSV, but with many modifications. Other translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.
structure, only to discover within it a new riddle that reduces understanding to speculation.

The following discussion focuses on one such mystery, which, to my mind, has not been addressed in a satisfactory way: the meaning of the collocation כוהני קורב, which appears at least six times in three different Songs. Both the consistent use of this construct phrase and its distribution throughout the work indicate that it belongs to the core phraseology of the Songs and stems from the essential ideology encoded therein. Admittedly, the nomen regens (כוהני, “priests of . . .”) is a well-known lexeme, amply recorded throughout the history of Hebrew, but the nomen rectum (קורב) is anything but transparent from a semantic point of view, and it requires close linguistic analysis and detailed exegesis.

1 Primary Evidence

An overview of the actual contexts in which the collocation is embedded allows one to sketch a preliminary, cotextual definition of its usage. Since the grammatical form of the word spelled קורב is to be considered unknown at this initial stage of the inquiry, it will be rendered by its orthographical representation, i.e., ‹QWRB›.

Song I:  
(1) Priests of ‹QWRB›, servants of the presence of the [most] holy King
(2) Knowledge is among the priests of ‹QWRB›, and by their mouth is the teaching of all the holy ones.
(3) He had established for himself the priests of ‹QWRB›, the holiest among the holy ones.

Song VIII:  
(4) Shem 배והני קורב סוד שני במעון פרעה [4Q403 i ii 19 || 4Q405 8–9
[= col. E] 2–3

3 For the time being it is also unique to the Songs, as no parallel to it has been detected in other Hebrew or Aramaic sources.

4 When quoting from the Dead Sea scrolls, overlapping manuscripts were merged into a composite text, so that brackets mark only conjectural restorations. The numbering of lines distinguishes, with the prime sign, between lines of columns (1, 2, 3) and lines of fragments (1ʹ, 2ʹ, 3ʹ).