CORRUPTION AMONG THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD:
A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

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In the retrospect to his seminal study of Galilee Seán Freyne stated that “...the Jerusalem temple continued to exercise a powerful attraction” for the people of Galilee.¹ In subsequent studies this line of argument has been reaffirmed and even used to help explain the nature of Josephus’ interaction with people in the region during the war.² Yet, the general caricature of the temple in scholarship is that it became a source of Angst for the Jewish people during the late Second Temple period. In particular, the high priests responsible for overseeing the temple in the Herodian period were corrupt and did not have the support of the community as a whole.³ My purpose here is to review the case for depicting the high priests as corrupt officials who lacked support in order to consider what implications, if any, it has for Freyne’s broad line of argument regarding the Galilee-temple connection.⁴

A recent, prominent advocate of the view that the high priesthood was corrupt is Craig A. Evans.⁵ He provides a comprehensive discussion of the diverse evidence deemed to depict the high priests as corrupt and unpopular. Given his underlying interest with placing Jesus in an historical context, Evans groups the various types of source material chronologically: “Post-70 c.e. Reflection” and “Traditions Specifically Reflecting the Time of Jesus.”⁶ He concludes that the evidence for

³ For example, public dissatisfaction with the high priests is fundamental to the thesis of Goodman (1987) regarding the causes of the war and to Horsley (2003) regarding the political situation in which Jesus’ ministry took place. The Qumran community remains the one clear example of Jews who were radically opposed to what was happening in the existing temple. In this paper the phrase “high priests” includes both people who served in the office and their family members.
⁴ For a comprehensive critique of the idea that the people of Galilee viewed the ancient northern kingdom of Israel as their cultural heritage see Freyne, 2000, 114–31.
corruption is “…substantial. This evidence antedates the time of Jesus, is subsequent to the time of Jesus, and can even be traced to the very time of Jesus.” While much of the argument is expressed through a process of accumulating as many citations of corruption as possible, it stands or falls on information contained in three key sources: Testament of Moses; Josephus; and early rabbinic traditions. The first is deemed to date to the time of Jesus and the other two, although post 70 c.e., provide corroborating testimony of actual corruption in the middle part of the first century c.e. The task at hand, therefore, is to discuss in detail the relevant passages from these three sources in order to determine their value as evidence of a general public perception of corruption among high priests. In particular, our interest will focus on whether or not sufficient attention has been given to placing the cited passages in their respective literary and historical contexts.

**Testament of Moses** 7

This text is a particularly significant testimony of the corruption of the high priests because it is deemed to date from the early part of the first century c.e. Interest centres on *T. Mos.* 6–7. In *T. Mos.* 6 events are mentioned that clearly allude to King Herod and the time immediately after his death: Herod is the “wanton king, who will not be of a priestly family” (6.2) and the “powerful kings” (6.1) he replaces were the Hasmoneans. After providing rather bleak commentary on the nature of Herod’s reign (6.2–5) that will last for thirty four years (6.6), the author moves forward to outline events that follow Herod’s death. The “powerful king of the West” (6.8) takes captives and assaults the temple.

The claim that Herod’s heirs will not reign for as long as their father (6.7) appears to indicate that this section of the text was written early in the first century c.e., certainly before 30 c.e. as both Herod Antipas and Herod Phillip retained control of their respective tetrarchies beyond the span of Herod’s reign.

What follows in *T. Mos.* 7 is the crucial passage. The author of the text refers to “destructive and godless men, who represent themselves

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8 Evans also draws upon material from Qumran and the Targums. See Evans 1995, 327–31, 337–38.
10 This is probably a reference to the campaign by Varus in 4 B.C.E. (*War* 2.39–79; *Ant.* 17.250–299).