

A KINGDOM of PRIESTS

Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism

Martha Himmelfarb



A Kingdom of Priests

JEWISH CULTURE AND CONTEXTS

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A Kingdom of Priests

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in Ancient Judaism

MARTHA HIMMELFARB

PENN

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In memory of
Milton Himmelfarb (1918–2006)
My father, my teacher

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Introduction

This book takes its title from God's promise to the children of Israel as they stand before Mt. Sinai: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all people . . . you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6). While the phrase itself does not receive a great deal of attention in the literature of the Second Temple,¹ I hope to show that the idea it expresses and the tensions it hints at are of central importance to Jews during that period.

The promise that Israel will be "a kingdom of priests" reflects a milieu in which priests hold an honored position. The Israelites, like other peoples of the ancient Near East, entrusted priests with the delicate task of mediating between humanity and the divine through the sacrifices they offered in the temple. The rituals priests performed were understood to keep the cosmos functioning properly; if the priests failed at their duties, the consequences would be dire. Priests are by definition a minority; indeed the Torah limits priesthood to a single family or tribe. Clearly "a kingdom of priests" was not meant to advocate that all Israelites serve as priests in the temple, sacrificing and eating consecrated food. Rather, as the context suggests, the phrase serves to emphasize the holiness of all Israelites.

The idea of Israel as a holy people is of course a central biblical theme. But the notion that all Israelites are equally holy, as "a kingdom of priests" implies, is more problematic. After all, if all Israelites are equally holy, why bother with priests in the first place? The tension between the holiness of the whole people and the existence of priests receives dramatic expression in the story of the rebellion of Korah during the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness (Numbers 16–17). Korah is a Levite, a member of the tribe that had been singled out for a special role in the cult. His rebellion grows out of his unwillingness to accept the more exalted priestly status that one particular family of Levites, Aaron and his sons, has claimed. Korah rejects not the institution of priesthood but particular arrangements for it that exclude him and most of the rest of the tribe of Levi. Thus, as the narrative now stands, its main point is to

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counter an assault by other Levites on the prerogatives of the sons of Aaron. But one argument the rebels bring against Moses and Aaron hints at an earlier story in which the rebels demanded an end to any form of hierarchy among the people of Israel: "All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (Num 16:3).²

The Torah rejects both types of criticism in no uncertain terms: the earth swallows up all of the protestors together with their families. And it is not only the Torah, a document written in part by priests, that believes in priests and their prerogatives. The prophets denounce their listeners' belief that enthusiasm for the cult will make up for lack of kindness to one's fellows (e.g., Amos 5:21-26), but they do not reject the institution of the cult itself. Indeed, Isaiah of Jerusalem, who condemns the sacrifices of the wicked in the first chapter of his book (Isa 1:11-15), understands God to be present in the temple, as his vision of the Lord enthroned among the seraphim (Isaiah 6) indicates. Two of the great prophets who came after him in the kingdom of Judah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were themselves priests (Jer 1:1; Ezek 1:3). Yet despite the embrace of the institution of priesthood by all strands of biblical thought, the tension inherent in the idea of a "kingdom of priests" remained unresolved.

A different way to read "a kingdom of priests" that at first appears to offer a solution to the problem formulated by Korah's companions is to emphasize the role of Israel in relation to other nations: "You shall be my own possession *among all people* . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Thus a prophet active in Jerusalem after the return from Babylonia imagines Israel fulfilling its destiny as a nation that serves the other nations as priest:

Aliens shall stand and feed your flocks,
foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;
but you shall be called the priests of the Lord,
men shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory. (Isa 61:5-6)

Here the whole people is to enjoy the benefits that Israelite society conferred on priests. Recognizing the special status of the people of Israel, other nations will provide its needs in exchange for its role of mediating between God and humanity.³ Yet the emphasis on Israel's special status in relation to other nations can also undercut the status of Israelite priests: the more Israel is differentiated from other nations, the less place there is for hierarchical distinctions within the holy people.⁴

Further, the idea of a holy nation is inherently unstable. Whether one chooses to emphasize the inner-directed or the outer-directed aspects of the phrase, the desire that God's special people be holy inevitably runs up against a less elevated reality, as the prophets tell us in considerable detail. The nature of that reality should come as no surprise since the criterion for membership in the people of Israel is ancestry, a criterion that does little to promote holiness. Yet the Torah imagines both the rewards and the punishments of the covenant in collective terms: the Israelites will together suffer exile for their sins, and they will together be restored to their land after they repent (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28-30). The tension inherent in collective responsibility for the covenant was intolerable for the great prophet Isaiah, who has God warn Jerusalem, "I will turn my hand against you / And will smelt away your dross as with lye, / and remove all your alloy" (Isa 1:25); after this purification, "you shall be called the city of righteousness, / the faithful city" (Isa 1:26). Thus only a small portion of the people would enjoy restoration, as Isaiah indicates with the name he gives his son, *Šē'ār yāšûb*, "a remnant shall return" (Isa 7:3).⁵

Implicit in Isaiah's vision of the purified remnant is a new criterion for membership in the people of Israel: piety rather than birth. Yet before the exile, it did not occur to anyone to apply that criterion to the present. As long as the land of Judah was ruled by a king from the house of David, the people of Israel was more or less co-extensive with those living in the land.⁶ After the return from the Babylonian exile, however, with the land no longer under Israelite rule, the extent of the people became a subject of concern and controversy. In the face of widespread intermarriage with neighboring peoples, both Ezra and Nehemiah demand that the members of their community divorce their foreign wives and send away their offspring (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13).⁷ But despite their zeal for endogamy, the authors of Ezra and Nehemiah, living after the exile, could not help but be aware of the problems of defining Israel on the basis of ancestry alone. Their remarkable term for the community of the return, *zera' haqqōdeš*, "the holy race" or, more literally, "the holy seed" (Ezra 9:2), offers a striking, if troubling, conflation of ancestry and merit.

The concern for merit is evident also in the Book of Ruth, which rejects Ezra and Nehemiah's definition of the boundaries of the community. It tells the story of a marriage that not only Ezra and Nehemiah but even the Book of Deuteronomy (23:4) would have condemned: the marriage of an Israelite man to a Moabite woman. The Book of Ruth, however, suggests that this marriage is not only acceptable but praiseworthy, because ancestry is not as important as merit. Its heroine's sacrifices for her beloved mother-in-law win her the admiration of all who

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encounter her and finally the benefits of marriage to a wealthy man. The connection to King David (Ruth 4:17) may be a later addition to the work,⁸ but even without it the birth of Ruth's son removes any question about her place in the community. Still, though it was written in the Persian period, the Book of Ruth is set in the days of the judges and presents its case in pre-exilic terms: the willing non-Israelite spouse is assimilated into the people of Israel without fuss or ceremony. Only later in the Second Temple period does a notion of conversion emerge, and even then there is no unanimity about the rituals required for it.⁹

The possibility of conversion develops out of the Jews' encounter with the Greeks, which marks a new stage in thinking about the definition of the people of Israel.¹⁰ The Greeks understood their culture to be available without regard to ancestry; even a barbarian could become "Greek in soul." This phrase comes from Clearchus of Soli's report of Aristotle's account of his encounter in Asia Minor with a learned Jew.¹¹ Although the passage does not say so explicitly, it is possible for a barbarian to become Greek in soul because Greek culture is acquired through education; thus it is potentially available not only to Greeks but to others as well. In the aftermath of the Maccabean Revolt some Jews come to understand their culture in similar terms, as the very term "Judaism" suggests, modeled as it is on "Hellenism."¹² Like Hellenism, Judaism could be learned, and thus gentiles could now become Jewish in soul.

The aftermath of the Maccabean Revolt also sees the emergence of sectarian definitions of the people of Israel that develop Isaiah's idea of the righteous remnant, leaving the rest of the people irrevocably behind. The Qumran sectarians understand themselves as children of light, fighting on the side of the angels in the eschatological battle, while the rest of the Jewish people belongs to the other side, the children of darkness. For these sectarians, Jewish ancestry is necessary, but far from sufficient, for membership in the holy community.

Both before and after the revolt it did not escape the notice of some Jews that the priesthood was subject to the same problem as was the people of Israel as a whole. The fact that priestly status was inherited meant that Jewish priests often fell short of serving as the models of holiness enshrined in the phrase "a kingdom of priests." Indeed, the difficulties posed by the hereditary priesthood are even more acute since priests should constitute an elite of holiness within the holy people, enjoying certain privileges even as they are held to higher standards than ordinary Jews. Thus it was more than a little troubling when priests failed to live up to the standards and did nothing to deserve the privileges. Recognition of this problem goes back as far as the Torah itself, which attempts to defuse it by telling two stories about how early occupants of the priestly office earned the right to it through their zeal for the Lord.

Although the stories come from different strands of the Torah and reflect different views of who is qualified to serve as priest, both recount their heroes' killing of idolatrous Israelites. The epic strand of Exodus reports that the Levites "ordained [themselves] for the service of the Lord" by rallying in response to Moses' cry and slaughtering worshipers of the golden calf among their fellow Israelites (Exod 32:25-29). The language of ordination, used by the P source only a few chapters earlier (Exodus 29) of Aaron and his sons, suggests that through this slaughter the Levites became priests. According to the priestly source,¹³ as the Israelites mingled with the Midianite women at Baal Peor (Num 25:1-9), Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, killed an Israelite man caught in flagrante delicto with a Midianite woman. This act wins its perpetrator and his descendants a "covenant of perpetual priesthood" (Num 25:13), and the story provides one priestly line with an origin in pious zeal like that the epic sources gave the Levites.

Still, even if these stories claim that the priestly line was originally chosen on the basis of merit, nowhere does the Bible suggest merit as an ongoing criterion for priesthood. Throughout the Bible there is widespread agreement that priesthood is hereditary and that it is connected to the tribe of Levi, although there is disagreement about the identity of the ancestor required for priestly status and about the types of personnel needed to staff the temple. Outside of the priestly sources, the Torah suggests a system in which all male descendants of Levi were priests.¹⁴ This understanding is implicit in the J and E narratives of the Torah; it becomes explicit in the Book of Deuteronomy with its expressions "the Levitical priests" (Deut 17:9, 18; 24:8; 27:9) and "the priests, the sons of Levi" (Deut 21:5; 31:9).¹⁵ On the other hand, P and H, the priestly sources, grant the priesthood only to descendants of Aaron, Levi's great-grandson. Through the Books of Exodus and Leviticus these sources are silent on the subject of the nonpriestly descendants of Levi, referring to priests as sons of Aaron and ignoring their more distant ancestor. Thus a first-time reader of the Torah would be somewhat surprised on reaching the Book of Numbers to discover the existence of the Levites as a group with a role to play in the Israelite cult (Numbers 3-18). Like the priestly sources in Exodus and Leviticus, the priestly material in Numbers understands priests as descendants of Aaron, but it departs from Exodus and Leviticus in treating the other descendants of Levi as a distinct group with cultic responsibilities of its own: the preparation of the tabernacle for breaking camp and its transportation (Numbers 4).

The historical developments reflected in the Book of Numbers' view of the Levites are unfortunately lost to us, but its picture of Levites as a distinct group standing in a subordinate relationship to priests became

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standard during the Second Temple period. Nehemiah's efforts at reform on the Levites' behalf reflect Numbers' picture (Neh 13:10-13), as does, somewhat later, the Book of Chronicles' depiction of a well-defined priestly hierarchy with a high priest at the head, priests descended from Aaron officiating at the altar, and Levites serving as musicians, singers, and gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 23-26). The preference in post-exilic sources for the picture of the Book of Numbers is perhaps not surprising. A reader who wished to reconcile the conflicting points of view he found in the Torah might understand the Levitical priests of Deuteronomy as descended not only from Levi but also, as P and H require, from Aaron, while the existence of the Levites as a distinct group would satisfy the expectations raised by the prominence of the Levites in the other strands of the Torah. It is striking, however, that Numbers' picture of priests as a subgroup of Levites is at odds with the evidence for the actual situation during the period of the return. According to the picture in Numbers, one would expect the number of nonpriestly Levites to be considerably larger than the number of priests, yet the census of those who returned to Judea with Zerubbabel lists more than twelve times as many priests as Levites (Ezra 2:36-42).¹⁶

The Torah says rather little explicitly about the apex of the priestly hierarchy, the high priest (Lev 21:10-15); most of what we learn about this figure emerges from the description of the activities of Aaron, the first occupant of the office. At his death, Moses strips Aaron of his special garments and dresses Aaron's son Eleazar in them to indicate that he has taken on his father's role (Num 20:23-28), but despite this story the Torah provides no guidelines for determining the high priestly succession. Indeed, while in the post-exilic period the office seems to have passed from father to son, there is some evidence in the Deuteronomic history to suggest that the high priest of the monarchic period was a royal appointee.¹⁷ Further, it is not until the Book of Chronicles that Zadok, one of the two high priests of David's court and the supposed ancestor of all high priests until the hellenistic reform in the early second century B.C.E., is explicitly placed in a line of descent from Aaron, Eleazar, and Phinehas (1 Chron 6:34-38). The silence of earlier sources on this point and the Canaanite associations of the name Zadok have led some scholars to suggest that he began his career as a priest in the Canaanite shrine in Jerusalem before David's conquest of the city, though important voices have also argued in favor of Zadok's Aaronide descent.¹⁸ Fortunately, what is important for my purposes in this book is not the actual development of the offices of priests, Levites, and high priests, now largely lost to us, but rather the way ancient Jews understood that history based on their reading of the Bible.

The prestige of the priesthood inevitably increased during the Second

Temple period. Under the monarchy, the temple was undoubtedly a central institution, yet as long as there was an Israelite king in power, it was under royal control. The priests who staffed it were royal retainers; the high priest exercised whatever power he held within the royal orbit. With the loss of kingship, the high priest became an important political figure in his own right, the recognized head of the people in the eyes of foreign rulers. Further, with the loss of the monarchy, the temple became by default Israel's preeminent institution. The status of priests in general, the anointed officials of the central institution, also rose. But as priests became more important, some of their countrymen began to wonder about their fitness for their office. While an observer of the priesthood could surely have noted some tension between ancestry and merit at any time in its history, the increased importance of priests made the tension more acute.

By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the temple was no longer the only institution at the center of the life of the people of Israel. Under Persian rule, the Torah became the law of the land in the province of Yehud. The authority of the Torah also served to support the existence of the priesthood and its hereditary character, which its laws ordained. But the Torah also constituted a new source of authority, and Nehemiah invokes it against priests who fail to operate according to its dictates.¹⁹ The institutionalization of the Torah required a new class of religious officials: scribes, skilled interpreters of the Torah. Many of these scribes were themselves priests, but their allegiance to the Torah sometimes made them critics of priests who failed to exemplify the holiness the Torah demands. Scholars have often understood the relationship between priest and scribe, like the earlier one between priest and prophet, as one of antagonism. I have already suggested that such a reading is a misunderstanding of the prophets' attitude toward the cult and its ministers. It is equally a misunderstanding of the scribes' attitude. There was considerable tension in the relationship, as Nehemiah's behavior demonstrates, but Nehemiah's criticism of individual priests was in the service of an ideal of priestly behavior against which they offended. Indeed, as self-conscious guardians of the Torah, scribes could not but support the priesthood as an institution.

It is a reasonable assumption that most Jews in the ancient world lost little sleep over the fact that neither the people of Israel nor its priests regularly achieved the holiness the Torah demands of them. The subject of this book is the minority that found this reality intolerable. I argue that in Palestine in the three centuries preceding the destruction of the Second Temple members of this minority with quite different points of view used the idea of Israel as a kingdom of priests to criticize their contemporaries and to imagine the people of Israel as a holy nation in a

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wide variety of literature, including apocalypses, wisdom texts, and legal texts. These texts take a variety of positions, from insistence that Israelite ancestry marks an almost angelic status on one extreme to radical redefinition of the boundaries of Israel to include only the pious within them on the other, but all had to contend with the inevitable tension between ancestry and merit. Nor was concern for these questions limited to Jews in Palestine; the writings of Philo of Alexandria show the relevance of these questions in a more cosmopolitan milieu.

I begin in the first chapter by considering the attitude toward priests and priesthood in the *Book of the Watchers* from the last part of the third century B.C.E. and the Wisdom of ben Sira from the beginning of the second century. As I have noted, the Second Temple period saw the emergence of a new kind of religious functionary, the scribe. The scribe's qualifications for his task had to do with skill and learning rather than ancestry. The *Book of the Watchers* offers criticism of contemporary priests and depicts its hero, a scribe, in priestly terms, implying that merit can earn priest-like status. On the other hand, Joshua ben Sira appears to be a supporter of the priesthood of his time, though I suggest that he is by no means uncritical of his contemporaries. But he is clearly an admirer of the high priest of his youth, Simon, whom he depicts as Wisdom's twin, thus conferring some of the earned prestige of scribes on the hereditary occupant of the high priestly office. Finally I consider briefly *Aramaic Levi*, which appears to come from circles close to those of the author of the *Book of the Watchers*, yet embraces the status conferred by priestly ancestry without any evident anxiety about merit.

The second chapter treats the *Book of Jubilees*, which draws on the *Book of the Watchers* and other Enochic traditions. Through both narrative and legal means, *Jubilees* depicts the people of Israel as a true kingdom of priests and insists that it is indeed a holy nation. It emphasizes the priestly status of a series of ancestors of the people of Israel, and some of its laws claim that through their sexual behavior Israelites have a direct effect on the sanctuary, just as priests do. Israel's holiness is built into creation since God conceived of Israel as the human counterpart to the angels. This holiness is transmitted by heredity; thus no one born outside Israel can become part of the people. In other words, *Jubilees* claims that merit and ancestry are one and the same. *Jubilees* was regarded as an authoritative work at Qumran, yet I suggest that its emphasis on ancestry is a response to sectarian attempts to redefine the people of Israel on the basis of merit.

The third chapter considers the way two halakhic works found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Temple Scroll* and the *Damascus Document*, use the purity laws of Leviticus to make all Jews more like priests. While the biblical laws apply to all Israelites, they have a far greater impact on

priests, who must be in a state of purity in order to serve in the temple, and on their families, who must be in a state of purity to eat the consecrated food that belongs to priests. By making the biblical laws more elaborate and more restrictive, these legal works make all Jews share at least to some extent the limitations imposed on priests.

The fourth chapter turns to sectarian attitudes toward priesthood, exploring the tension between sectarian use of merit to define membership in the people of Israel and the hereditary status of priests. A comparison of the *Damascus Document* and the *Rule of the Community* shows that priests have become less important in the *Rule of the Community* because its more radically sectarian outlook makes hierarchy within the sect less palatable. So too the Book of Revelation, a Jewish sectarian work from a quite different milieu, takes the idea of a kingdom of priests with great seriousness. John's solution to the problem faced by the *Rule of the Community* is not to reduce the importance of priesthood but to make priests of all the pious, Jews and gentiles, men and women, alike.

The fifth chapter moves from Palestine to Alexandria to examine the tension between ancestry and merit in the picture of the Jewish people in the work of the philosopher Philo. For Philo, the Torah contains the true philosophy, and thus those who adhere to it are genuine philosophers. The hereditary priesthood decreed by the Torah and the cult in which it ministers are, unfortunately, anything but philosophical. Given his allegorical approach to the Torah and his preference for the soul over the body, Philo could have chosen to allegorize both priests and cult virtually out of existence. Yet, remarkably, despite his Platonism, Philo is deeply attached to the temple and its rituals, and while he often pursues allegorical interpretations of the cult, he refuses to let go of real-life priests and sacrifice. Thus he too must struggle to make sense of the significance of a priestly class for a kingdom of priests. His solution to the problem they pose is to suggest that the nation is the archetype for the priesthood rather than the priesthood for the nation.

In the final chapter I sketch the fate of the idea of Israel as a kingdom of priests after the destruction of the temple prevents priests from performing the tasks the Torah mandates for them. Rabbinic Judaism represents itself as a temporary substitute for the temple, and it prays for the restoration of the temple, its cult, and its personnel. Still, the absence of working priests serves to reduce anxiety about the tension between ancestry and merit. The status of the new elite class, the rabbis, is based at least in principle on merit rather than ancestry. And as Jews come to realize that loss of the temple is more than a temporary inconvenience, the rise of Christianity, culminating in its adoption as the official religion of the empire, changes the nature of Jewish minority status, and not for the better. No longer are Jews one among many ethnic

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groups in a pluralistic society, distinctive perhaps for their monotheism, but in many ways much like their neighbors. Rather, in the eyes of the authorities they have become the minority par excellence, and their minority status has theological significance. While rabbinic society recognizes the possibility of conversion, its dominant way of speaking about Jewish identity is as a function of birth, perhaps in response to the strong sense of distance from the surrounding society. Indeed, Jewish ancestry comes to be understood as carrying with it the presumption of salvation. Thus after discussing crimes to be punished by death, the Mishnah insists, "All Israel has a portion in the world to come" (*m. Sanh.* 10.1). So too the *'Amidah*, the central prayer recited three times a day, assures Jews that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will remember the good deeds of the ancestors and bring a redeemer to their descendants. The connection to the ancestors, whose merit is beyond dispute, reduces the pressure on the conduct of ordinary Jews since the merit of the ancestors guarantees the salvation of the Jewish people, if not of individuals.

Experience taught ancient Jews how difficult it was to fulfill the Torah's demand that Israel be a holy people. It was certainly not made any easier by the fact that the usual mode of entrance into the people of Israel was birth. So too when priests fell short of the holiness required of them, their failure was perhaps not surprising since they attained their office on the basis of birth alone, but it was even more distressing than that of ordinary Jews given their status and responsibilities. Thus, while the phrase "a kingdom of priests" may have been little quoted in the Second Temple period and virtually ignored by the rabbis, the tensions it expresses are central to understanding ancient Judaism.

Chapter 1

Priest and Scribe

Ancestry and Professional Skill in the Book of the Watchers, the Wisdom of Ben Sira, and Aramaic Levi

Of all the institutions of the period of the monarchy, the temple proved the longest lived. The First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., but by 515 a new temple had replaced it, and the Judean priesthood was restored, more or less, to its old tasks.¹ Monarchy and prophecy, or at least prophecy in the style of the prophets who gave their names to biblical books, did not prove as resilient. No Davidic king ever again reigned in Jerusalem.² While prophecy flourished during the period of the exile (Ezekiel; 2 Isaiah), the beginning of the return (Zechariah 1-8; Haggai; 3 Isaiah), and even beyond (Zechariah 9-14; Malachi), it had more or less disappeared by the end of the Persian period. The prophets we glimpse later in Josephus's contemptuous descriptions are wonder-workers or leaders of penitential movements preparing for the imminent end.³ The crucial factor in this change was probably not the demise of the monarchy—after all, as I have just noted, prophecy continued to flourish through the exile and into the period of the return—but the emergence under the Persians of a new institution, the Torah. This written constitution had been anticipated by the publication of Deuteronomy in the reign of Josiah toward the end of the monarchy, but with the demise of the monarchy, the text achieved a new type of authority. And because of the support of the Persian rulers, this authority was practical as well as theoretical.

The authority of a written text required a new type of religious functionary: the skilled interpreter of the text. Ezra is the first such “scribe [*sōpēr*] skilled in the Torah of Moses” (Ezra 7:6) known to us, but he was certainly not the last.⁴ “Scribe” is a profession; to become a scribe skilled in the Torah of Moses required intelligence and education, and, as ben Sira indicates centuries later, education required wealth (Sir 38:24). Still, to be a scribe did not require particular ancestry. The profession was open to any Jewish man of requisite intelligence and sufficient means to undertake the education.