CHAPTER EIGHT

COVENANT RENEWAL IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND JUBILEES AND ITS BIBLICAL ORIGINS

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3 we uncovered the biblical, historical, and theological roots of the formula “entering the new covenant in the land of Damascus” in the Damascus Document (D). There I concluded that, although the term is indeed dependent on the famous “new covenant” text in Jer 31:31–34, among others, the idea of “newness” as such was not the most important factor in the adoption of the term. From the perspective of the movement behind D (and indeed of the post-exilic redactors of the Pentateuch), the “new covenant” could be and was subsumed under the prior and larger category of “covenant,” so that theologically the term “covenant” was to be preferred to “new covenant.” The term “new covenant” was adopted because that is the term that appeared in the prophetic texts that the movement behind D read as being fulfilled in its own history. Thus the “new covenant” does not have to do primarily with new content or new revelation (although those may have been included) or even with the eschatological nature of the “new covenant.” Rather it has to do primarily with the identification of the covenant movement that the remnants of the exile established (or rather that God established for them) with the “new covenant” foretold by Jeremiah. I also argued in Chapter 3 that the Qumran community did not have an expectation of an eschatological new covenant as much as it had an expectation of an eschatological renewal of the one (and only) covenant of God.¹

That leads to the topic of the present chapter, covenant renewal. I indicated in Chapter 3 that “new covenant” and “covenant renewal” needed to be conceptually distinguished and that a separate study on the topic of “covenant renewal” was necessary. It is frequently assumed that “new covenant” and “covenant renewal” are interchangeable terms

¹ See esp. pp. 121–23.
in the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), and so we find them used interchangeably also in the secondary literature. When one studies the terms closely, however, one realizes that they have quite different roots and quite different theological significations. We have seen in Chapters 3 and 4 that the “new covenant in the land of Damascus” refers quite specifically to a covenant movement that arose at the time of the exile, or that at least traced its origins back to the exile, and that had a clearly discernable polity and theological framework not unlike other covenants of the post-exilic period. “Covenant renewal” is a theological concept that has different roots and a different signification from the “new covenant in the land of Damascus.” This is no mere quibble over words. In order to demonstrate this, it is necessary to undertake a separate examination of the topic of “covenant renewal.”

We shall be interested primarily in the three places in the DSS (1QSb III,26; V,21; 1Q34 – 1Q34 bis 3 ii 6=4Q509 97–98 i 8) where the verb מְשַׁרֵּד (pi'el) is used with the object מִשָּׁרֶד. Before we come to those texts, however, it will be helpful to look at Jubilees, a book that has much in common with the DSS. In this book the notion of “covenant renewal” is found much more frequently than in the DSS, and its meaning is easily discernable. Therefore we shall study that book first, and see what we might be able to learn from it about covenant renewal that may help us better to understand the topic in the DSS. We shall also look at the OT, where we can already see the roots of the idea.

---