CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

REVELATORY EXEGESIS AT QUMRAN

One of the hallmarks of biblical interpretation in the Dead Sea Scrolls is the prominence of pesher exegesis. In examining the mechanics of pesher interpretation at Qumran, scholars generally focus on identifying the literary features and techniques of pesher exegesis and defining the limits of the pesher genre.1 Scholarship has often emphasized the distinction that exists between the pesher mode of scriptural exegesis and earlier and later models of Jewish biblical interpretation and commentary.2 Accordingly, some scholars look outside of the Jewish context for some phenomenological correspondence with pesher interpretation.3 Many point to the pan-Near Eastern practice of dream interpretation as the inspiration and foundation of pesher exegesis.4 There have been, however, some attempts to locate elements of pesher exegesis purely within a Jewish framework and recognize its continuity with earlier and near contemporary approaches to Scripture.5 These

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1 See bibliography above, p. 29, n. 12.
2 See, for example, Naphtali Wieder, “The Dead Sea Scrolls Type of Biblical Exegesis among the Karaites,” in Between East and West: Essays Dedicated in Memory of Bela Horovitz (ed. A. Altman; London: East and West Library, 1958), 75, who remarks that the pesher method is sui generis in the history of Jewish biblical interpretation. See also Burrows, “Prophecy,” 227; Schiffman, Reclaiming, 223–225.
3 See Collins, “Prophecy,” 304, who observes some similarities between pesher and the Egyptian Demotic Chronicle. While Collins notes the correspondence, he cautions against the possibility of any direct literary influence.
approaches generally focus on the literary method of pesher exegesis and its points of correspondence with other known interpretive traditions.\(^6\)

All of these approaches have served to illuminate the origins and mechanics of the pesher method. This chapter explores an additional background for the pesher approach, which provides the ideological basis for the unique approach to Scripture found within pesher texts. This chapter draws upon the treatment of revelatory exegesis in chapters 10–11 in order to locate pesher exegesis within this phenomenological landscape of biblical interpretation. In doing so, I argue for the application of the framework and foundations of revelatory exegesis to the method of pesher interpretation at Qumran.\(^7\) In this sense, the pesher method emerges as a viable mechanism for mediating the divine word and will to the Qumran community and marks another significant turn to literary prophecy in the Second Temple period.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Another relevant historical parallel can be found in Josephus’ self-conscious prophetic statements in War 3.352–353. Josephus interprets the meaning of his recent dreams through his careful reading and interpretation of Scripture. See discussion in Gray, Prophetic Figures, 35–79; Gnuse, Dreams, 21–33.

\(^7\) Scholarship on pesher literature has generally not emphasized the important points of continuity between biblical prophetic traditions and the ideological basis of pesher exegesis. A notable exception is Collins, Apocalyptic Vision, 67–87, who explores the biblical basis of pesher-type exegesis in the indirect modes of revelation that appear in the Second Temple period. See also Brownlee, Midrash Peshar, 28–30, who briefly discusses the place of the pesher method in the context of biblical prophetic literature. The overemphasis on identifying the exegetical features of pesher has obfuscated its important function as a means of revelation. See, however, George J. Brooke, “Qumran Pesher: Toward the Redefinition of a Genre,” RevQ 10 (1981): 483–504, who argues that pesher exegesis is marked both by an exegetical desire to interpret the biblical text and the belief that the interpreter possesses a special ability to reveal the true meaning of the prophetic text. See further discussion of these competing themes in Berrin, “Pesharim,” 123–130.

\(^8\) The relationship of Josephus’ testimony regarding the use of Scripture in Essene prophecy to the Qumran Pesharim and more general cases of revelatory exegesis is difficult to determine. Concerning Essene prophecy, Josephus states: “There are some among them, who profess to foretell the future, being versed from their early years in holy books, various forms of purification and apophthegms of prophets; and seldom, if ever, do they err in their predictions” (War 2.159; translation following H. St.