CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NEW COVENANT, THE REINTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE AND COLLECTIVE MESSIAHSHIP

The notion of new covenant surfaces only once in the whole vast corpus of the biblical literature—in Jeremiah 31:31–34 (cf. 32:39–40). Scholars generally agree that the passage faithfully expresses Jeremiah’s views if not necessarily the prophet’s *ipsissima verba*.¹ There also seems to be almost a full consensus that this oracle does not refer to a new revelatory meaning of the Torah; rather, that the Torah’s internalization is the issue.² As observed more than half-century ago by W. D. Davies, the tension between external and internal covenants did not have to mean that Jeremiah disrespected the former, that of Sinai.³ In fact, internalization (realization?), sometimes equated with the universal knowledge of God, has been seen by most scholars as representing the true novelty of the covenant in this passage, as compared to the situation reflected in such sayings as Deuteronomy 6:6–7, 10:12, and 30:6 and Psalms 37:31 and 40:8. In other words, but for internalization/realization, Jeremiah’s covenant was the same covenant, albeit renewed, as the preceding ones: same nation, same kernel of both new and old—the

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Lord’s Torah.⁴ Admittedly, there have been some voices of dissent, claiming that Jeremiah’s oracle, if contextualized in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, may express the prophet’s perception of Moses’ covenant as “now a dead letter”,³ but the former appraisal remains the dominant one. It will be shown below that in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul adopts the internalization-centered understanding of Jeremiah 31:31–34. It will be claimed, however, that at the core of Paul’s reasoning there also lies the notion of the new covenant as designating an ultimate messianic reinterpretation of Scripture—an idea that seems to have reflected not only the apostle’s thinking but also that of his milieu within the Jesus movement. It is this peculiar exegetical development and its genesis that this concluding chapter is going to deal with.

The possible repercussions of this emphasis on new eschatological exegesis for the role ascribed to the messianic leader(s) vis-à-vis the community of the electi will also be addressed. As noted in Chapter 4, research of the last decades has highlighted the varied nature of Second Temple Jewish messianic notions; the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was especially instrumental in clarifying that anticipation of the Davidic Messiah was only one of a number of existing patterns of messianic belief, competing with traditions focusing on other charismatic initiators of the era of salvation, such as the priestly Aaronic Messiah, a prophetically inspired leader or even an angelic figure.⁶ This variety may be seen as building, inter alia, upon alternative notions of sacral

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⁵ See Holladay, ‘The Structure and Possible Setting’, 188. Cf. Weinfeld (‘Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis,’ 32), who allows that the prophet might have perceived the new covenant as associated not with formal statutes but exclusively with the “circumcision of the heart”. J. Swetnam (‘Why Was Jeremiah’s New Covenant New’, in: G. W. Anderson [ed.], Studies on Prophecy: A Collection of Twelve Papers, Leiden 1974, 111–113) suggested a completely different solution. According to him, the passage from Jeremiah reflecting the criticism against the priestly circles that had formerly been in control of the Scripture at the same time bears witness to a new development—namely, the beginning of Torah study in the synagogues, polemically presented as standing for non-mediated access to the knowledge of God.