CHAPTER THREE

EMERGING CHRISTIANITY AND ESCHATOLOGY

1. The Sources and their Order of Discussion

The sources for eschatology in emerging Christianity and their order of discussion are the subject of this subsection. Section two will give a general outline of recurring biblical texts and themes which provided the exegetical basis for earliest Christian expectations about the final age. Sections three through ten will analyse eschatological material in separate (groups of) texts with attention for their historical and social settings. The concluding section will evaluate the picture of pre-70 CE and post-70 CE texts and traditions with their respective elaborations on biblical tradition; a survey which is at the basis of further traditio-historical comparison with Qumran literature in the subsequent chapters.

The order of my discussion of individual texts is related to the extent to which information about the Palestinian Jewish milieu of emerging Christianity can be derived from these respective texts. While this chapter focuses on the canonical Gospels, the Gospel of Thomas, Pauline Letters, and the Acts of the Apostles with a view to pre-70 CE and post-70 CE social and historical settings, it also aims to lay a foundation for further exploration in subsequent chapters of New Testament features of eschatology, apocalypticism and messianism which can be traced back to the milieu of the historical Jesus.

The discussion of eschatology starts with the post-70 CE evidence of canonical as well as extra-canonical Gospels rather than the chronologically earlier Pauline Letters for two main reasons. First, as compared to the canonical and some extra-canonical Gospels, Paul’s letters are generally considered of secondary importance for historical Jesus research. Second, as compared to the Palestinian Jewish settings of

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1 See the categorisation of Jesus-sayings in Paul’s Letters among ‘freie Jesusüberlieferung’, a final rubric in the survey of sources by Theissen and Merz, Der historische Jesus, 65–8. This is not to negate traditio-historical points of connection between Paul and Jesus-tradition; cf. Dungan, The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul; Wenham, Paul. Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?.

the canonical and some extra-canonical2 Gospel evidence, Paul’s letters reflect a virtually complete shift to missionary activity in the Diaspora. The discussion of eschatology will therefore start with the oldest of the Synoptic Gospels, Mark, then turn to the Sayings Source Q shared by Matthew and Luke,3 and subsequently go into the evidence of Matthew and Luke with their respective special materials.4 Since the Jesus-traditions in the Gospel of Thomas stand in an arguable relation of literary (in)dependence vis-à-vis the Synoptic tradition5 and comprise sayings of potential importance for historical Jesus research,6 their evidence will be discussed before we turn to eschatology in the Gospel of John. The discussion of the Acts of the Apostles follows that of the Pauline Letters, since the latter have a ‘relative’ priority to the information of Acts, with regard to both Paul’s life and thought and post-Easter missionary activity at large.7

The mostly post-70 ce evidence of other New Testament Letters also comprises eschatological passages, but they hardly contribute to the understanding of eschatological ideas in pre-70 ce emerging Christianity. These post-Pauline Letters are therefore left out of consideration in this chapter. The Apocalypse of John attests to a late first-century ce perspective of Christology and comprises eschatological concepts such as ‘the first resurrection’ (Rev 20:5) and ‘the second death’ (Rev 20:14) that are unparalleled in the rest of the New Testament and pre-70

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2 Some logia of the ‘Sayings’ Gospel of Thomas presuppose Palestinian Jewish settings (GTh 52, 60).
3 It has sometimes been argued that Matthew and Luke may have relied on different versions of Q, but this view is not beyond dispute. See e.g. Allison, The Jesus Tradition in Q, 3 and n. 14, who mentions a scholarly debate about “two different versions of the source (Qmt and Ql), as supposed by Sato, Q und Prophetie, and critiqued by J.M. Robinson and A.D. Jacobson. Scholars usually explain the variations between Matthew and Luke as the products of different redactional adaptations and arrangements of Q material.
4 Conzelmann and Lindemann, Arbeitsbuch, provide an implicit pragmatic reason to treat the Matthean evidence first as “erweiterte Nacherzählung” of Mark (326), before turning to the Lucan evidence as “geschichtliche Erzählung” with a more sophisticated literary style (338). For a survey of M and L, see e.g. Schnelle, Einleitung, 206–9, who notes at page 206 that this ‘Sondergut’ cannot be catagorised among ‘sources’, but among ‘Traditionsbereichen’.
5 See the extensive list of Synoptic parallels to the sayings in Thomas provided by H. Koester, “Introduction,” Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 (ed. Layton), 38–49 at 46–8. On Matthean parallels to sayings in the Dialogue of the Saviour and its literary kinship to Thomas, see e.g. Klauck, Apocryphal Gospels, 185–91.
6 See Theissen and Merz, Der historische Jesus, 55–6; cf. Franzmann, Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings, 1–23 (“Nag Hammadi and Jesus Research”).
7 See Knox, Chapters in a Life of Paul, 34.