CHAPTER SIX

MESSIANISM IN QUMRAN AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Introduction

The comparative study of messianism in Qumran and the New Testament is a subject that merits separate attention, even though it intersects with eschatological perspectives (cf. chapters two and three) and the study of apocalyptic texts (e.g. 4Q246, 4Q521). The reason for this is twofold. First, Qumran literature published since the 1990s provides much new evidence that has recently become the subject of intensive study and methodological debate.1 Second, the canonical Gospels yield pictures of Jewish messianic expectations at the time of Jesus that recurrently evoke the question of whether and how contemporary Jewish literature provides contextual evidence and how Christology in the New Testament developed from the Jewish origins of the Jesus-movement.2 This chapter focuses on comparative study of messianism in Qumran and at the origins of emerging Christianity, thereby having in view pre-70 CE traditions that the New Testament writings allow us to reconstruct. Apart from the Pauline letters and the Gospels, other New Testament writings will thereby only receive attention to the extent that a connection with pre-70 CE traditions can be made plausible.

1 See e.g. the following recent books with particular attention to Qumran evidence of messianism: García Martínez, “Messianische Erwartungen in den Qumranschriften,” 171–208; Collins, The Scepter and the Star; Evans and Flint (eds.), Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls; Charlesworth, Lichtenberger, and Oegema (eds.), Qumran-Messianism; Zimmermann, Messianische Texte aus Qumran; Fitzmyer, The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Origins, 73–110 (“Qumran Messianism”); Xeravits, King, Priest, Prophet; Porter (ed.), The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments, with the article by A. Wolters, “The Messiah in the Qumran Documents,” 75–89; Fitzmyer, The One Who Is to Come, 82–133 (“Extra-biblical Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period”) at 88–115.

2 Cf. Miller, “The Problem of the Origins of a Messianic Conception of Jesus,” 301–35 at 301 who notes the following crucial question on which the first Princeton Symposium on Judaism and Christian origins agreed: “Christos is the title or term most frequently applied to Jesus in the New Testament. Scholars agreed that the crucial question is the following: How did this happen, since ‘the Messiah’ is rarely found, and the functions or attributes of ‘the Messiah’ are even less explained, in extant pre-70 Jewish documents?”
1.1. Problematic Presuppositions about Early Jewish Messianism

In the study of late Second Temple Judaism, ‘messianism’ frequently serves as umbrella term for ideas about a divinely commissioned redeemer figure who plays a crucial role in acting on behalf of Israel’s eschatological deliverance. The heterogeneous and pluriform character of the evidence resists a comprehensive definition of the term messianism. The ancient body of literature does not attest to a uniform expectation of ‘the Messiah’ but to several eschatological protagonists whose messianic role and identity is a matter of debate. Some examples will illustrate this point.

Earlier twentieth-century scholarship, as illustrated by an influential study by Sigmund Mowinckel, associated two sides with early Jewish messianism, this-worldly and otherworldly, but predominantly identified the this-worldly side with a horizon of political expectation. The alleged horizon of political expectation would focus on a future-eschatological ruler figure from the house of David whose role consists in delivering the people of Israel from enemies and in playing a leading role in the restored kingdom of David sanctioned by a divine covenant of royalty. Mowinckel’s study was critical of assumptions that messianism would be “the substance of a general hope throughout Judaism”, arguing that the milieu of messianic faith evoked in the Gospels only “coincides with that represented by the apocalyptic literature and by certain more limited circles”. Several presuppositions on early Jewish messianism as represented by Mowinckel have become susceptible to criticism.

The predominantly political conceptualisation of the term ‘Messiah’ in early Judaism appears problematic in view of the diverse literary evidence. The longer-known Qumran sectarian literature already yielded a more differentiated picture of messianic expectation, as, for instance, the plural reference to ‘the messiahs of Aaron and Israel’

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