DEMONS AMONG THE MESSALIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Those who have studied the ‘Messalians’ know that it is almost impossible to give a really satisfactory description of a complete corpus of texts which would allow us to study Messalian ‘doctrine’, and to arrive at a description of the role of the demon or demons in this doctrine. In the context of this contribution we can only situate the problem in general terms and shall have to make a clear decision about our sources (1). On the basis of this decision we shall summarise the role of the demon(s) (2), and finally, we shall attempt to investigate the origin of this doctrine (3).

THE SOURCES

Research on the Messalians has involved more than one individual ascetic text or text corpora. Best known are the Pseudo-Macariana, but apart from them one could also refer to the Acts of Philip, or the Syriac Liber Graduum. When M. Kmosko published the text of the latter writing, he prefaced it by a long introduction including a collection of sources which might be considered ‘Messalian’. It is plain that Kmosko situated the Liber Graduum within the history of the Messalian movement, but today not everybody would want to agree with that judgement. One could also dispute the Acta Philippi in this

1 A fair introduction to this corpus has been given by E.A. Davids, Das Bild vom Neuen Menschen. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Corpus Macarianum (Salzburg-München: Pustet, 1968).
regard. E. Peterson brought forward a hypothesis which is no longer followed by scholars. But the main problem exists with regard to the Pseudo-Macariana. The very thorough study of K. Fitschen no doubt can be considered a landmark, but we nevertheless remain reluctant to combine the history of transmission of the pseudo-Macarianian texts and that of the Messalian movement as historically documented. Questions are obviously focussed on the early stages of transmission: are these to be found on the side of the background of the pseudo-Macariana, i.e., a Messalian Ascecticon, or are we to reconstruct the (lost) concern about the Messalian movement from the side of Amphilochius of Iconium? This is a dilemma difficult to resolve, even if we approach the matter in a chronological fashion, in so far as it is possible to do so. This approach means in the first place that we cannot do much with Ephrem Syrus. He refers to the Messalian heresy, but without much comment on its contents. If the Hymns against Heresy are Edessenian hymns, we are allowed to speak about a date of 363–373. Epiphanius of Salamis does not help us any further: his treatment of the Messalians, a late contemporary heresy (= ca. 376) describes a number of ascetic practices, but it remains difficult to characterise them as ‘Messalian’. However, Epiphanius certainly illustrates the tendency to mark everything which is ascetic but deviant or unwanted, read ‘apotactic’, as ‘Messalian’. This is only a beginning. Moreover, the difficulty

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7 I.e., to be dated during Ephrem’s stay in Edessa, which lasted from 363–373, cf. S. Brock, A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature, (Kottayam, Kerala: SEERI, 1997), 27.
8 It may be that his information is oral, cf. F. Williams, The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 629. However, the heresiologist’s information does not refer to demons or the like. It cannot even be said that the words at the end of 80.3.5 about the foolishness of the ‘messalians’ implies any hint of their ‘Enthusiasm’ as ‘Einwirkung des heiligen Geistes’, a remark borrowed by Williams (The Panarion, 631) from ‘Lietzmann’, which is obviously an error for ‘Holl’ (namely, the latter’s GCS edition, cf. 487).