Jesus and the Jewish Diviner: The Use and Misuse of 4Q242

Beniamin Pascut

Since their discovery in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls have changed the dynamics of the study of early Christianity, and the great amount of ink that has been spilled for their examination represents a strong testimony to their importance.\(^1\) Impressive parallels between the canonical gospels and the Scrolls have been proposed throughout the years, and while some stood the test of time, other parallels have been universally rejected.\(^2\) This is what scholarship is all about—sharing, expending, evaluating and accepting or rejecting ideas. It is a cumulative process, a testing and refinement of theories that others have offered for discussion and consideration. Whether good or bad, exceptional or obscure, most theories that make it to print are subjected to serious review, which either affirms their integrity or calls into question their objective foundation. Some theories remain unnoticed, and those that infiltrate rapidly in hundreds of footnotes do so either because they are too important not to be passed on or too controversial to be left unsolved. There are also those theories that receive wide and favorable acceptance across the scholarly spectrum without serious evaluation. These are the most troublesome of all, for their uncritical acceptance often leads to misconception and misuse.

It is the purpose of this essay to contribute to the reassessment of a theory that has been accepted for far too long without a thorough investigation. For over six decades, the Prayer of Nabonidus of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q242/4QPrNab ar) has been increasingly recognized as an important parallel to the miracle story of the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1–12 (also Matt 9:1–8, Luke 5:17–26). Jesus’ claim to forgive the sins of the paralytic has

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been paralleled with the role of the unnamed Jewish man of 4Q242, who is believed to have forgiven the sins of the Babylonian king, Nabonidus. Four years after its publication, Dupont-Sommer was the first to make the confident claim that 4Q242 is a perfect parallel to Mark 2:1–12, and thirteen years later, Vermès expressed the same confidence when he said:

This fragment which has so luckily survived is particularly valuable in that it sheds fresh light on the controversial Gospel episode of the healing of the paralytic. Considered side by side with the Nabonidus story, there is nothing outstandingly novel or unique in the words of Jesus, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’

Many New Testament scholars have accepted this conclusion with much enthusiasm. In an effort to root Jesus in Judaism, a vast number of expositions on Mark 2:1–12 and its corresponding pericopes continue to appeal to 4Q242 with little or no interaction with its various reconstructions and with the assumption that, far from being radically unique, Jesus’ claim to forgive sins finds close affinity to 4Q242. In light of such assumption, and given that no detailed study has been written to explore the relationship between 4Q242 and Mark 2:1–12, the essay at hand seeks to revisit this supposed parallel. Two questions will be considered in two major sections: Who is the agent of forgiveness in 4Q242, and what is the extent of the correspondence between 4Q242 and Mark 2:1–12?

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