CHAPTER ELEVEN

IRANIAN INFLUENCES IN QUMRAN?

The influence of Iranian religious ideas on the development of some key concepts in the Hebrew Bible was one of the most hotly debated issues among the adherents and adversaries of the religionsgeschichtliche Schule in the first part of the twentieth century. The discovery of the Qumran texts gave a new impetus to this controversy, and provided both partisans and adversaries with new arguments. However, in spite of the many studies, a consensus cannot be said to have emerged and the discussion continues today. In the article on “Zoroastrianism” in the Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Klaus Koch asks himself:

Were the later layers of the Hebrew scriptures, especially the apocalyptic writings, dependent on Iranian models or was the influence the other way around? In scholarly literature, this question is highly disputed.

At this conference, dedicated to exploring the influence of Oriental ideas on Celtic thought within a Millennial perspective, it seems fitting

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to look again at this issue from the specific perspective of the texts of Qumran, and to ask whether the influence of Iranian religion on some of the key apocalyptic ideas of the Qumran community is the most reasonable explanation for the appearance of these ideas in this typically Jewish context. If this were the case, and if it is reasonable to accept that these millennial ideas have travelled from the Persian Empire to the shores of the Dead Sea, their travel farther West to distant Ireland would be less of a surprise.

I am convinced that with the elements at our disposal, certainty on this matter, as with so many other aspects of historical research, is unattainable. Consequently, I do not intend to prove that this cross-fertilization took place. In a scale of possible, probable, and certain, my conclusion will remain at the level of probability. But the two prime examples adduced show not only that this influence may reasonably be assumed, but also that it is the most likely explanation.

1. Methodological Premises

In order to show that certain ideas from one religion could have influenced another, two basic presuppositions are crucial: an earlier attestation of these ideas in one of the two religious systems ("the temporal priority"), and the possibility of cultural contacts through which these ideas could have been canalized ("the channels of transmission"). Without these two presuppositions there can be no possibility of influence.

There can be no doubt about the cultural contacts in our case: Palestine was dominated by the Achaemenian empire from 538 B.C.E. until the Macedonian conquest, a sizeable Jewish population was exiled to Mesopotamia, and many of the exiles remained there during the Parthian and Sassanian empires; in addition, some knowledge of Iranian religion was disseminated in the West during the Hellenistic period by Greek writers. And within the Qumran writings we do have certain

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