THE MYSTERY OF CREATION IN 4QINSTRUCTION*

MATTHEW J. GOFF
Georgia Southern University

Introduction

4QInstruction (1Q26, 4Q415–418, 423) is the largest wisdom text from Qumran.¹ One of the most important phrases of the composition is לֹּא לְדַעַת. This phrase occurs over twenty times in the composition.² The text’s addressee (the לְדַעַת, or “understanding one”) is often exhorted to study the לֹּא לְדַעַת. He is told to “gaze” (לָא לְדַעַת) upon,³ “examine” (לָא לְדַעַת), “meditate” (לָא לְדַעַת) upon, and “grasp” (לֹּא לְדַעַת) it.⁴ He is encouraged to contemplate the לֹּא לְדַעַת because he can learn from it. Through the study of the לֹּא לְדַעַת the addressee can attain, for example, the knowledge of good and evil (4Q417 1 i 6–8) and of people’s fate at the final judgment (4Q417 2 i 10–12). The לֹּא לְדַעַת is the means by which wisdom is obtained in 4QInstruction.

¹ This article is a revised version of a section from my dissertation, The Worldly and Heavenly Wisdom of 4QInstruction (University of Chicago, 2002), which is forthcoming in Brill’s STDJ series. I thank John J. Collins for his guidance on both the dissertation and the present article. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the New England regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature at Brandeis University on 12 April 2002.

² See, for example, 4Q415 6 4; 4Q416 2 i 5 (par 4Q417 2 i 10–11); 4Q416 2 iii 9, 14, 18, 21 (par 4Q418 9 8, 15; 4Q418 10 1, 3); 4Q417 1 i 3, 6, 8, 18, 21 (par 4Q418 43 2, 4, 6, 14, 16); 4Q417 1 ii 3; 4Q418 77 2, 4; 4Q418 123 ii 4; 4Q418 172 1; 4Q418 184 2; and 4Q423 4 1, 4 (par 1Q26 1 1, 4). The phrase has also been plausibly reconstructed in 4Q415 24 1; 4Q416 17 3; 4Q418 179 3; 4Q418 190 2–3; 4Q418 201 1; 4Q418c 8; 4Q423 3 2; 4Q423 5 2; and 4Q423 7 7.

³ See 4Q416 2 i 5 (par 4Q417 2 i 10); 4Q417 1 i 3, 18 (par 4Q418 43 2, 14). See also 4Q418 123 ii 5.

⁴ See 4Q416 2 iii 9 (par 4Q418 9 8), 4Q418 43 4 (par 4Q417 1 i 6), and 4Q418 77 4. See T. Elgvin, “The Mystery to Come: Early Essene Theology of Revelation,” Qumran between the Old and New Testaments (eds F.H. Cryer and T.L. Thompson; JSOTSup 290; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 133.
The importance of the theme of creation for assessing the ḥĕḇĕš ḇ embark has been emphasized most forcefully by A. Lange. For him the ṭḥĕḇĕš ḇḥ marks a predetermined natural order governing the world. The ḥĕḇĕš ḇḥ is a “präexistente Ordnung des Seins.”⁵ He argues that God endowed the world with a rational structure at the moment of creation. The foundation of the knowledge that the addressee can obtain “hat Gott schon vor der Schöpfung gelegt, als er die weisheitliche Ordnung von Sein und Schöpfung schuf, die in 4QSap A (4QInstruction) gerne mit dem Begriff ḥĕḇĕš ḇḥ (‘Geheimnis des Werdens’) bezeichnet wird.”⁶ The ḥĕḇĕš ḇḥ therefore signifies a “Schöpfungsordnung” that is in direct continuity with Proverbs 1–9, which also explains that the world has an inherent sense of order by appealing to creation.

In contrast, T. Elgvin argues that “4QInstruction’s understanding of the world and man is determined more by apocalypticism than by traditional wisdom.”⁷ He agrees with Lange that the ḥĕḇĕš ḇḥ represents “the pre-existent sapiential order of creation,” but he understands the ḥĕḇĕš ḇḥ primarily as an apocalyptic concept.⁸ Both Lange and Elgvin acknowledge that 4QInstruction has affinities with both the sapiential and apocalyptic traditions. Both scholars agree that the ḥĕḇĕš бро refers to a divine comprehensive plan that orchestrates events. The aspects of the ḥĕḇĕš бро that are in continuity with the sapiential and apocalyptic traditions should be understood as complementary influences. It is more important to understand how these traditions are combined in 4QInstruction than to argue that one should be stressed at the expense of the other.⁹ In this article I will illustrate this by examining the theme of creation in 4QInstruction. The composition understands the nature of the created order as following a divine framework that is revealed to the addressee, a viewpoint that is in keeping with the apocalyptic tradition. But 4QInstruction also appeals to creation to explain the natural order. This trope is in continuity with the tradition of Proverbs 1–9, as stressed by Lange.

⁶ Weisheit und Prädestination, 91.