
Menahem was a leading Essene, says Josephus. Menahem was excommunicated by Hillel and his (Pharisee) followers, says the Mishnah. Israel Knohl posits (perhaps rightly) that these Menahems are one and the same. This Menahem, says Knohl, composed the Self-Glorification Hymn, added during his lifetime to the hymn collection in the Qumran Thanksgivings Scroll. He was also a courtier of King Herod, whose servants thoughtfully gave him vegetables in a stone bowl instead of the rich food served to other courtiers. But all the time he and the Essenes were plotting the government’s overthrow, in the war which is the subject of *The War of the Sons of Darkness and the Sons of Light*. When Herod died in 4 BC, Menahem thought the time had come: he raised an armed revolt (though disappointed of Pharisaic support) and tried to take control of Judaea. He and the priest who shared his leadership of the Essenes were killed by the Romans (the beast that comes up from the abyss), and their bodies left unburied under guard in the streets of Jerusalem for three and a half days—for they (Knohl argues) are the Two Witnesses whose story is in Revelation 11.

The Self-Glorifier claimed an exalted place in heaven (‘I shall be reckoned with the angels; my dwelling is in the holy council’), but also asserted his equivalence with the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 (‘Who has borne all afflictions like me? Who compares to me [in enduring evil]?’). So he identified himself with the Essene Messiah referred to in the Damascus Document (14-24). This, Knohl notes, disproves Rudolf Bultmann’s argument that Jesus could not have conceived of himself as a Messiah who would be put to death and rise again—an argument which was grounded in the belief that in Judaism before Jesus there was no idea of a suffering, dying and rising Messiah (cf. 2).

This is the main point of *The Messiah before Jesus*, says Knohl: ‘the combination of divinity and suffering, which is clearly found in the messianic hymn [= Self-Glorification Hymn], influenced the emergence of Christianity’ (52).
Well, yes. But if that is his main point, Knohl has really put himself to unnecessary trouble to write a whole book for its sake. He is hardly the first to mention the relevance of the Self-Glorification Hymn, and the theories of the Qumran sect, as background to Jesus’ teachings. Bultmann’s idea (in *Theologie des Neuen Testament*, 1948) about the inconceivability of a Jewish teacher speaking about the Messiah as Jesus did, is simply outdated, having come before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.

What about the rest? The difficulty is Knohl’s method of argument. Take an example (42):

As the two messianic leaders were killed in 4 BCE, they surely were active in the period previous to that year—that is, during the reign of King Herod (37-4 BCE). As we have seen, all four copies of the messianic hymns were written precisely at that period. One can therefore assume that one of the two messiahs killed in 4 BCE was the hero of the messianic hymns from Qumran.

No, one cannot! We can agree that human beings are active before their deaths and not after (which seems to be the message of the first sentence). But even if conclusions from palaeographic evidence dating all copies of the hymns to the late first century BC were not approximate (which they are), no one could prove that the hymns were not copied from earlier documents. Knohl’s identification is not impossible—but it is extremely speculative.

Many similar lines of argument could be quoted. The sort of speculation Knohl likes makes things worse. He wants a Grand Unifying Theory to bind famous texts together. He is not shy, despite all Tolstoy’s satire, of interpreting the Apocalypse. Some features of the Two Witnesses passage might be used as Knohl wants, but why should this story from the past (Knohl puts the composition of Revelation about AD 80) structure John’s second (apocalyptic) Woe? And what about prophecy, when Knohl’s Menahem and his sect were secret plotters? What he has done is picked a few lines, regardless of context, and forced them into the mould of his model.
And then, there is the War Scroll. What about the possibility that this text was written much nearer the First Jewish War and the Qumran sect’s eventual destruction? Knohl skates over it. But even if the War Scroll is early, it is a strange plan. The men aged over fifty fight in the front rank, while the younger men help out behind the lines. The enemy are the Kittim (originally, ‘people of Citium’ in Cyprus, so by extension ‘Greeks-and-Romans’). But they are ‘the Kittim of Assyria’. Kittim of where? Many features show that the war described is not of this world. The purpose of the Scroll is not as Knohl supposes. But suppose, for a moment, that Menahem and his followers had written it. Why would it survive in good condition, when (as Knohl notes) the Thanksgivings Scroll containing the Self-Glorification Hymn seems to have been deliberately defaced before being put into storage? Knohl ascribes the defacement to later Essenes who rejected Menahem’s claims. Would they not equally have ceased to believe that the war in which he died was useful ‘to think with’?

A book for the general public (as this is) does necessitate ‘a simplification of the text’ (xii). But describing the lunch menu at Herod’s palace is not simplification. It fills space; in this book, it acts as a substitute for dealing with real difficulties. No doubt, in writing The Messiah before Jesus, Knohl enjoyed tying up so many loose ends and answering so many unanswered questions, and all in so few pages. On a few points he may be right. As a professional scholar he is, I suppose, entitled to write a ‘what if ...’ book, full of speculation. But he ought to tell his public that that is what his book is—which he has hardly done.

Paul McKechnie
University of Auckland