CHAPTER THREE

4 EZRA: “BECAUSE OF MY GRIEF I HAVE SPOKEN”

The repetitive, even paradigmatic, nature of one traumatic loss could hardly find a better illustration than the post-70 C.E. apocalypses treated in the next two chapters of this study. The events of the Babylonian Conquest and Exile to which the prophet Ezekiel was party become the shared backdrop for three texts—4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and 3 Baruch—written in the aftermath of the Romans’ destruction of the Temple. When the Second Temple fell to another world empire, the conditions brought about by this national tragedy were similarly mournful, but the traditions available for expressing grief and anger toward the situation were quite different from those of Ezekiel and others in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C.E. By the first century C.E., numerous philosophies and perspectives unheard of before the Exile were at least peripherally known to segments of some Jews. Forms of knowledge and literature, including wisdom and apocalypticism, supplanted prophecy as an expression of God’s communication with his people. And, most clearly, there was a five hundred year old record of the fact that such a calamity had occurred previously in the people’s history.

One major theological reality to develop since Ezekiel’s time was a heightened level of messianic expectation, a trend incorporated into 4 Ezra, attested to in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and which came to fruition in the sectarian movement that became Christianity. Another is a degree of abstraction and essentialization of the idea of the Law, an issue important to both 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch.¹ In the decades that followed the fall of the Second Temple, certain hopes for the messianic age would surface and die out with the passage of time; other dire sentiments about the future of the Jewish people would fade and be replaced with a qualified optimism, grounded in the underlying nature

of the Law. Still, in any consideration of the status of the Jewish people and their future, the presence of the absent Temple would palpable. The tension between what has been lost and what must be regained gives these other Zion Apocalypses their melancholic tone. Of the protagonists of the three texts, Ezra comes across as the most ambivalent about the status of his people and hence is the most psychologically complex and interesting.

A number of treatments of 4 Ezra have already picked up on its movement from grief to consolation and the relationship to its structure, function, and meaning. E. Brandenburger and W. Harnisch emphasize the central transformative significance of Vision Four, the Vision of the Weeping Woman, that moves the seer from opposition to support, from skepticism to wisdom. Michael Stone, on the same vision, notes that mourning for Zion up to that point “has been the central motive of the book so far; that mourning finds its consolation in the present chapter.”2 George Nickelsburg acknowledges the inextricable connections in these texts among the author’s grief, the need for resolution by his society, and what he calls “lamentable facts of life in the present.”3 Edith Humphrey claims that while the plot moves from lamentation to consolation, a palpable transformation occurs along the way, and the initial suffering is most likely the very means by which it occurs.4 John Collins recognizes the “psychological process of calming fear and building trust” in the repetitive interaction between Ezra and the angel Uriel.5 Finally, Daniel Merkur provides one of the most in-depth analyses of the role of mourning in these visions, but focuses on a novel aspect: extreme grief as inductive of visionary experience.6 Many others also note this structure. It is worth reiterating that the goal of this study is not merely to draw attention to

---


3 George Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 286; also noted at 287 and 293.

