

CHAPTER THREE

“WHY DO YOU LOOK FOR THE DECLINE OF YOUR ENEMIES?” 2 BARUCH AND THE ROMAN QUESTION

The author's choice of Ezra as the central figure of *4 Ezra* deliberately shifted the focus of that work to the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem. The biblical Ezra was not, unlike figures such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, a member of the generation that lived through the loss of the Holy City. The city of David and the temple of Solomon were known to him only through hearsay and the sacred texts that he reportedly restored to the rebuilt metropolis of the Jews. *4 Ezra* preserves the distance from the catastrophes of 587 B.C. and A.D. 70 as Ezra lies on his bed in Babylon reflecting on the continued might and wickedness of Babylon rather than reliving and remembering the horrific scenes of the destruction itself. The lament in the fourth vision almost seems to arise from the need of the author to establish his credentials as a true mourner for the lost city. The pain in some sense seems dulled by the passage of years.

The next three texts that we shall examine in this study, *2 Baruch*, *3 Baruch*, and *4 Baruch* (also known as the *Paraleipomena Jeremiae* or *Continuation of Jeremiah*) reject the path taken by the author of *4 Ezra*. The authors of these three works do not feature a figure from the period of the restoration. Rather they draw on the circle around the Prophet Jeremiah to find the characters through which they meditate on the events of 70. This allows them to deal in a more immediate way with the sufferings of the generation that experienced the loss of the Holy City to the Romans. While *3 Baruch* only reflects briefly on the destruction of Jerusalem before the seer is whisked off on a heavenly journey to discover the secrets of the cosmos, both *2 Baruch* and *4 Baruch* are firmly anchored in the historical reality of the events that precede, accompany, and follow the catastrophic events that engulfed Jerusalem in A.D. 70.¹ The latter pair of texts begins at the scene of the crime in the moments before the destruction, providing the seers,

¹ Though all three Baruchic texts are related, the bond between *2 Baruch* and *4 Baruch* is much closer. As will be argued below in Chapter Four, *3 Baruch* represents

and the audience of the texts, a front row seat from which they might observe the unfolding events. Afterwards, as their fellow countrymen are dragged off to exile in Babylonia, the seers are left behind to pick up the shattered pieces. *2 Baruch* maintains the setting throughout the text with Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch, left behind to try to gather together the remnant community and forge a plan for continued existence. The author of *4 Baruch*, by contrast, transcends the anguish that accompanies the loss of the Holy City as he melds the generation of the destruction with that of the restoration in a text that sweeps across the intervening years, which pass literally like a dream. Before entering into a discussion of these three texts in this chapter and the ones that follow, it would be useful to review the salient points of the ministry of Jeremiah and his helper, Baruch.

Jeremiah son of Hilkiah was born into a priestly family in Anathoth not far from Jerusalem. His prophetic career spanned the reigns of Josiah and his successors Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah up until the fall of Jerusalem in 587 (Jer 1.1–3). These years witnessed a titanic struggle for power in the Near East between the empires of Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon, with Judah in the middle. Judah found itself on the wrong side of the struggle twice. In 597 Jerusalem was besieged and captured by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. On that occasion the king of Judah was deposed and a number of the nation's leaders were dragged off to Babylon where they laid the foundations of an exilic community. Zedekiah, who was left behind as the new king of Judah, did not maintain his allegiance to the Babylonian overlord, prompting Nebuchadnezzar to return to Judah in 587. This time he destroyed Jerusalem and carted the remainder of the Jerusalem elite off to join the exilic community in Babylon.

Throughout these decades of vacillation, as the allegiance of Judah's kings swung back and forth from Egypt to Babylon, Jeremiah's view of the regional situation remained constant. From the time of Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Egypt at Carchemish in 605 the prophet of Anathoth had advocated an unwaveringly pro-Babylonian policy (Jer 27, 29). This policy did not spring from any lack of patriotism, but rather from the prophet's understanding that God's support of Babylon was intended as a chastisement for the idolatry rampant in Judah at that

the development of the central message of *2 Baruch*, though the author employs very different means to do so.