 CHAPTER 6

Fourth Ezra: Time and History as Theological Critique

1 The Search for Origins in 4 Ezra

4 Ezra is an apocalyptic work that was most likely written during the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE). This pseudepigraphic composition, which is set in the thirtieth year after the destruction of the First Temple (4 Ezra 3:1), opens with a series of three dialogues between the biblical Ezra and the angel Uriel, in which Ezra challenges the justice of the destruction of the temple. The subsequent three sections consist of visions shown to Ezra. The book’s final passage, generally known as its epilogue, narrates the communal responsibilities imposed on Ezra before his translation to heaven.

The trajectory of the book chronicles Ezra’s transformation from an individual Jew mourning the destruction of the temple to a leader of the people, a prophet, and a lawgiver. Ezra, who issues damning critiques of divine justice at the beginning of the book, slowly comes to acknowledge the grounds for the destruction once he receives a series of visions whose interpretations clarify God’s sovereignty over history and confirm his intentions, formulated at creation, to redeem the Jews. With this change in attitude, Ezra becomes capable

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1 Michael E. Stone, Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1990), 10. This date is based on the Eagle Vision of 11:3–12:3. See, however, Lorenzo DiTommaso, “Dating the Eagle Vision of 4 Ezra: A New Look at an Old Theory,” JSP 20 (1999): 3–38, who suggests that the symbolism in that vision better fits the events of the Severans than the Flavians and dates the vision to 218 CE. The place of composition is less clear, with Rome or Israel the most likely candidates. See Stone, Fourth Ezra, 10.

2 Scholars generally identify the pseudepigraphic author of the book with the biblical Ezra; for an alternative possibility, see Robert A. Kraft, “‘Ezra’ Materials in Judaism and Christianity,” in ANRW II.19.1 (1979): 134, who suggests that at the time of the composition of 4 Ezra, the priestly Ezra of the Hebrew Bible and the prophetic Ezra in works such as 4 Ezra “would have been considered to be two different persons.”


4 The movement of the book from distress to consolation, with the fourth vision of the mourning woman as the turning point, was emphasized by Earl Breech, “These Fragments I Have Shored against My Ruins: The Form and Function of 4 Ezra,” JBL 92 (1973): 267–74.
of leading the people, comforting those still mourning the destruction, and transmitting to them a literary heritage (twenty-four books for the masses, seventy for the wise) before being translated to heaven.

Although 4 Ezra is the only work discussed in this study that was not written during the second century BCE, it is nevertheless important for understanding the relationship between the historical experiences of Second Temple Jews and their ideas about the shape of historical time. The author of 4 Ezra wrestles with the temporal implications of the destruction of the Second Temple in a series of historical reviews at different points in the book. Ezra's major concern is understanding whether the destruction signals a break from the past and constitutes a new beginning, and each of the historical reviews suggests a different way of relating the destruction of 70 CE to the past.

As we have seen throughout this study, communities seek to construct their identity and aspirations in the present by identifying their own temporal beginning in the past. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple, hope for the future required that the people overcome a sense of temporal rupture. In order to restore continuity between past and present, the author of 4 Ezra offers his audience a narrative of beginnings. Hindy Najman describes 4 Ezra as an effort to “unfreeze the present and recover the future” by turning to the past.5 The different historical surveys in 4 Ezra isolate one of three historical moments as the beginning of God’s special relationship with Israel: creation, the eternal covenant with Abraham, or the giving of the Torah at Sinai. By considering multiple possible beginnings, each of these reviews of the past provides the author’s community with different, even conflicting, visions of itself. If the election of Israel took place at creation or with the Abrahamic covenant, then God is bound eternally to his people. Accordingly, the history of Israel should progress forward in linear fashion without temporal breaks that disrupt the covenantal relationship. The destruction of the temple, however, constitutes such an unprecedented break, compelling Ezra to challenge divine justice. In the other texts that I have examined in this study, the belief that Israel’s election began at creation served to diminish the “terror of history.” In the case of 4 Ezra, however, it functions as the basis for theological critique.

As Ezra’s dialogue with the angel Uriel progresses, Uriel convinces his interlocutor that the election of Israel was not eternally binding. The destruction of the temple was not distinctive but rather was an example of divine retribution.

5 Hindy Najman, Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future: An Analysis of 4 Ezra (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 18. I thank Professor Najman for sharing a pre-publication copy of her important work with me. While the book appeared too late for me to engage it fully, the reader will notice a shared interest in questions about time and history.