CHAPTER 7

Synthesis and Conclusions

This study consists of close readings of four separate sets of texts: Wisdom of Ben Sira, the book of Jubilees, 4 Ezra, and the Animal Apocalypse (AA). Using these sources as test cases, my analysis has been in service of a larger question: what was the relationship between the experiences and historical settings of Jewish writers of the Second Temple period (or, in the case of 4 Ezra, the generation that followed the temple’s destruction) and their perspectives on the shape of time?

I have reserved explicit comparison among the four texts for this concluding chapter. The synthesis below will consider the intersections between the various texts as they pertain to the relationship between time and history, as well as important theological matters.

1 The Timeless Shape of History

A community’s attempt to contextualize its experiences in relation to the past—its origin, its relations with others, its mission, and its reason for being—all require a certain conception of time. History and time are inextricably linked. The role of historical experience in altering a community’s perspective on time is most apparent when they regard that experience as unprecedented. In such cases, they employ new conceptions of time to account for novel historical circumstances. In analyzing how the authors discussed in this study described the shape of time, we seek to understand how they imagined their place in history in light of their present reality.

In the case of Second Temple Judaism, the experiences of exile and foreign subjugation were frighteningly unprecedented, and they elicited questions about God’s ongoing fidelity to his people. This interpretation of their experiences presupposed a linear shape of time that had been punctured by the destruction of the temple. Among this study’s core texts, this dynamic is perhaps most apparent in the dialogue section of 4 Ezra. In some of his sharpest formulations, Ezra challenges the divine justice of the destruction, which, he contends, punctured the linear shape of covenantal history. In all of our texts, the temporal prism through which they perceived their present reality could only change by substituting a different shape of time, one which I have identified as “timeless.” Within such a conception of historical time,
nothing unprecedented, such as the destruction of the temple, could occur. Instead, history consists of paradigms that serve to create unity across history, thus linking the past and present through endless reiterations of repeating patterns.

2 The Role of Temporal Beginnings

In examining the relationship between time and history, the concept of temporal beginnings has figured prominently in my analysis. Beginnings do not simply represent the point in time to which a community traces itself. Rather, they set the tone for that community’s character and aspirations, describing the past in a way that serves the interests of the present. By linking past and present in this way, narratives of beginning set the shape of historical time.

The texts at the heart of this study illustrate the need for a community to contextualize its experiences by placing them in a broader temporal framework that can be traced to a particular beginning. Each of the authors ultimately situates the historical experiences of his community within a beginning at creation, thereby guaranteeing a positive resolution to its troubles. Even with redemption thus assured, these writers also had to explain how their present related to history since creation and to outline an understanding of history that could explain the delayed fulfillment of God’s primordial plans. In different ways, our writers described history as timeless in order to argue that until God consummated the relationship that he had forged with his people at creation, nothing definitively new, such as the challenging circumstances of the Second Temple period, could occur. The timelessness of history deprived discrete events of their distinctiveness and instead highlighted their paradigmatic role as indicators of God’s eternal commitment to the people. Conceiving of history as timeless provided historical events with a “significant feeling of normative certainty”—in our case, a guarantee that God would eventually realize the plan that he had formulated at creation.

One set of timeless patterns in our texts sought to demonstrate the periodic fulfillment of God’s prehistorical intentions, though the particular pattern differed in each work. The historical paradigm for the author of Jubilees concerned the divine suppression of the hegemony of the demonic forces. Ben Sira unified history through his focus on the travels of divine, itinerant Wisdom from creation through Simon the high priest. The AA identified all historical actors as various types of animals, with Israel’s history consisting of the divine

1 Jarvis, *Times of Terror*, 144.