CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP ON 4 EZRA

1. Introduction

Fourth Ezra, a Jewish apocalypse written around 100 C.E., stands out within the apocalyptic literature for the daring way in which it addresses questions of theodicy.¹ The author, apparently following the example of the Book of Job, employed the dialogue form to wrestle with these questions. Fourth Ezra is divided into seven episodes, which are traditionally referred to as visions, but in fact only three of them take the form of symbolic visions followed by interpretations.² The first three episodes, which account for more than half of the book, are contentious dialogues between the seer, Ezra, and an angel, Uriel. The fourth episode begins like the dialogues, with a lament by Ezra, which is followed by a dialogue between Ezra and a mourning woman; but the woman is transformed into a city before Ezra’s eyes, and subsequently their conversation is interpreted as part of a vision of the eschatological Zion. The fifth and sixth episodes are also symbolic visions that are described as dreams and are interpreted by Uriel. The final episode, often referred to as the epilogue, consists of a narrative of

¹ Second Baruch, another apocalypse written in the decades following the destruction of 70 C.E., is most similar to 4 Ezra in terms of the type of questions raised by the seer, but Baruch is not nearly so persistent or skeptical as Ezra. He does not dispute the answers to his questions, which for most of the book come directly from the Lord; an angel (Ramael) first appears in chapter 55, to provide a lengthy interpretation (chs. 55–74) of a vision Baruch has in chapter 53. There are so many parallels between 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch that a relationship of literary dependence seems likely; most scholars believe that 2 Baruch was written in response to 4 Ezra. Pierre Bogaert argues inconclusively for the priority of 2 Baruch; see his Apocalypse de Baruch: Introduction, traduction du syriaque et commentaire (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1969), 287–88.

² 2 Baruch also seems to be divided into seven sections, but they are less clearly marked than in 4 Ezra. Thus two different seven-part structures have been proposed in two dissertations on 2 Baruch: Gwendolyn B. Sayler, Have the Promises Failed? A Literary Analysis of 2 Baruch (SBLDS 72; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984) and Frederick James Murphy, The Structure and Meaning of Second Baruch (SBLDS 78; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).
Ezra’s restoration of the Scriptures, along with the dictation of seventy secret books, and ends with his translation to heaven.

Two main problems have been the focus of much of the modern scholarship on 4 Ezra. The first is the status of the disagreements between Ezra and Uriel in the dialogues, since it is not clear if one, or both, or neither of them represents the author’s own views. While Uriel speaks with authority—indeed he sometimes speaks in the persona of the Most High—Ezra speaks with a passionate and lyrical eloquence that many readers find compelling. Scholarly attempts to identify the author with either the angel or the seer—and to demonstrate that the opposing point of view is defeated—founder on the lack of a clear resolution to the issues debated in the dialogues. On the other hand, scholars who represent the author’s point of view as a combination of views expressed by Ezra and Uriel are forced to acknowledge its incoherence. The present study argues that neither of the interlocutors in the dialogues represents the author’s views at the time of writing.

The second problem is the relationship of the dialogues to the visions and epilogue, given that the dialogues themselves are inconclusive and the visions and epilogue do not respond directly to the problems raised in the dialogues. Whereas the dialogues, particularly Uriel’s speeches, focus on universal human concerns and the salvation of individuals in the final judgment, the visions present a national eschatology and the epilogue addresses the present concerns of Israel. Generally, those authors who have devoted their attention to a careful exegesis of the dialogues have tended to minimize the importance of fifth and sixth episodes, the visions of the Eagle and the Man from the Sea. The structure of the work, however, points to the visions and epilogue for the author’s resolution to the problems raised in the dialogues. Therefore, the eschatological hopes expressed in the visions must be taken seriously as part of the message of the book, even though they conflict to some extent with both Ezra’s concerns and Uriel’s eschatological revelations in the dialogues.

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3 An example is Claude G. Montefiore, IV Ezra: A Study in the Development of Universalism (Arthur Davis Memorial Lecture; London: Allen & Unwin, 1929). His position is that the author “hates, and rebels against, the doctrine which he feels obliged to teach,” namely that “the vast majority of the human race have gone, and are going, to perdition: as to the Jews, things are rather better, but even with them, not so very much” (ibid., 13). See below, section 2.1, for a discussion of this problem in Richard Kabisch, Das vierte Buch Ezra auf seine Quellen untersucht (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprechts Verlag, 1889).