CHAPTER TWO

THE SAPIENTIAL BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICTING THEOLOGIES IN THE DIALOGUES OF 4 EZRA

1. Introduction

Although the affinities of 4 Ezra with the wisdom tradition have been noted in passing by a number of scholars,¹ no one has yet attempted to correlate the positions taken by Ezra and Uriel in the dialogues with competing forms of Jewish wisdom that developed in the Second Temple period. Brandenburger and Harnisch, who read the dialogues as a representation of a contemporary theological debate, do not see the debate as being between rival schools of wisdom. Brandenburger observes that the author “writes as a representative of wisdom circles,” but he takes into account only the “apocalyptic wisdom” revealed in

Uriel’s speeches and in the visions. He treats Ezra’s point of view as a skeptical “anti-theology” and therefore does not attempt to locate it in relation to any known theologies. Similarly, Harnisch sees Ezra’s position as a composite of various challenges to the author’s theology, from both the creation and the covenant traditions, united only by their skepticism. Both he and Brandenburger have come to see the dialogues as instructional rather than polemical in intent, but they identify Uriel as the only instructor and Ezra as the representative of those in need of instruction.

If, however, Ezra and Uriel represent the worldviews of two different schools of wisdom, it is possible that the dialogues are meant to be instructive to the members of both schools. This purpose would account for the curious fact that neither point of view clearly prevails within the dialogues. While the author does grant more authority to the positions taken by Uriel, he places very eloquent challenges to those positions in the mouth of Ezra. Moreover, the visions in the fourth, fifth and sixth episodes do not simply confirm Uriel’s eschatology in the dialogues, but rather shift the emphasis from an individual to a national eschatology that succeeds in consoling Ezra where Uriel’s arguments failed. Thus, although Uriel takes the role of instructor in the dialogues, in the course of the book his theology is “corrected” by the author as much as Ezra’s is.


3 Harnisch, “Der Prophet.” 477.

4 “Schools of wisdom” is used here in the figurative sense of “schools of thought.” Nevertheless, it is likely that the covenantal form of wisdom was taught in schools that trained scribes (and perhaps in other schools as well, as education outside the home became more widespread in Greek- and Roman-ruled Palestine). See Aaron Demsky, “Education,” *EncJud* 6:382–98 (especially 384–86); James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 85–113, 266–77; David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). As for eschatological wisdom, schools may have existed to teach this type of wisdom within the communities that produced the wisdom texts found at Qumran, or it may have been passed down from parents to children, as implied by 4Q162 3 iii 18. Strugnell and Harrington comment in their introduction to the critical edition of 4QInstruction, “The rhetorical situation of instruction suggests a school (as in Sirach), though what sort of ‘school’ is to be imagined is not at all clear (since generally only one person is being instructed).” See John Strugnell and Daniel Harrington, *Qumran Cave 4 XXIV, Sapiential Texts, Part 2: 4QInstruction (Musar leMevin): 4Q415ff, with a re-edition of 1Q26; with an edition of 4Q123 by T. Elgvin (DJD 34; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 20. (Henceforth Strugnell and Harrington, *DJD 34.*