

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE EPILOGUE AND THE CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF 4 EZRA

#### 1. THE EPILOGUE

The seventh episode of 4 Ezra differs in so many respects from both the dialogues and the apocalyptic visions that it is generally referred to as the epilogue. This term can connote secondary importance, and indeed many scholars have tended to treat it as an afterthought to the main message of the book.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that “the thread that holds the book together is the Odyssey of Ezra’s soul,”<sup>2</sup> the epilogue does seem superfluous, since Ezra’s conversion is complete by the end of the previous episode. Yet Stone himself recognizes that from another point of view, the climax of the book comes in the epilogue.<sup>3</sup> Both the dialogues and the visions can be viewed as preparation for the most important revelation that Ezra receives: the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Scriptures (which need to be restored because they were burned in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, according to 14:21–22; cf. 4:23) and seventy additional books that contain “the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge” (14:47).

The significance of the twenty-four and seventy books will be discussed below; the noteworthy point here is the break in the chain of scribal transmission of Scripture occasioned by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. From this author’s perspective, the textual tradition of written revelation goes back only to the time of the Babylonian Exile,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Hermann Gunkel viewed the epilogue as an originally independent “legend of Ezra” which the author added to his book to give it “an aesthetically pleasing conclusion” (“Das vierte Buch Esra,” in *APAT* 2:348). Earl Breech concurs, adding that it “cannot be drawn into the pattern of the prophet’s consolation,” since his consolation “... was achieved after the climactic dream visions” (“These Fragments Have I Shored Against my Ruins: The Form and Function of 4 Ezra,” *JBL* 92 [1973]: 274).

<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 416, 428.

to Ezra and his five scribes.<sup>4</sup> Hence Ezra is depicted as a second Moses in the epilogue. The total of forty days of fasting in the previous six episodes is balanced by Ezra's forty-day fast in the epilogue, during the writing of the ninety-four books (14:42–44), recalling Moses' forty-day fast during the rewriting of the tablets of the law (Exod 34:28).<sup>5</sup> The forty-day fast in the epilogue may be meant to draw an analogy between the re-inscription of the commandments on the second set of stone tablets after Moses destroyed the first set (Exod 32:19; Deut 9:17) and Ezra's inspired dictation of the ninety-four books, after the Babylonians burned the "law" (4 Ezra 14:21–22).

The most obvious factor setting the epilogue apart from the rest of the book is the absence of Uriel: the voice that addresses Ezra at the beginning of the episode is clearly that of the Most High (14:3). Another significant change is that in the epilogue, Ezra emerges from isolation and assumes leadership over the people as a whole and over the five scribes. This is in contrast even to the interlude after the fifth episode, when he speaks prophetic words of consolation to the people but then withdraws from them again (12:46–49). As the conclusion of the previous

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<sup>4</sup> While the placement of Ezra during the Babylonian exile is of course anachronistic, there may be a grain of historical truth in this legend. David Carr suggests that the scrolls containing whatever Israelite literature existed before the Exile probably were destroyed, by and large, when Jerusalem fell. He envisions the scribes of the exile working mainly from "memorized building blocks" of the old tradition, recasting the sacred literature to address the needs of the exilic community. "Overall, it appears that the exile was a time of renewed focus on Israel's pre-land traditions, the Mosaic Torah, with radical reformulations of those pre-land traditions being done in the oral-written matrices of both royal, nonpriestly scribal circles and priestly groups." See David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–68.

<sup>5</sup> Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 374, 431. For a more detailed treatment of the forty-day time frame of the first six episodes, see Michael P. Knowles, "Moses, the Law and the Unity of 4 Ezra," *NovT* 31 (1989): 261–65. Knowles associates Ezra's first forty-day fast (during the first six episodes) not with the period of Moses' reception of the law, but rather with the period of Moses' intercession for the people after the golden calf incident (Deut 9:18, 25–29); the forty days of fasting in the epilogue then corresponds to the period of Moses' second sojourn on the mountain, during which he received the ten commandments for the second time (Deut 10:1–5, 10). Although the need for the restoration of the law is ultimately due to the sins of the people, according to Ezra's speech to the people (14:30–33), Ezra's laments are not really over the sins of his people, as Moses' were. Moreover, despite what he tells the people in 12:48, Ezra's primary activity over the first forty days is not intercession for his people, but the reception of esoteric revelation. Therefore the two forty-day periods in 4 Ezra probably correspond to the two forty-day periods when Moses was on the mountain with God, according to Deuteronomy 9–10 (cf. Exod 24:18 and 34:28), to which the author vaguely alludes in 4 Ezra 14:4.