Penitential prayers play a minor yet not insignificant role in Daniel, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra, three important apocalypses of Second-Temple Judaism. Such prayers, by their very nature, presume that human action can influence the future. But apocalypticism is an inherently deterministic worldview. Thus the presence of prayers in these texts raises questions about their purpose, as well as broader issues regarding the nature of free will within the limits of the apocalyptic worldview.

In this paper I contend that the purpose of the penitential prayers in all three apocalypses is identical: they provide a platform for the argument that the worldview is the only appropriate response to the current state of affairs. In order to see things more clearly, one may...
distinguish between the formal and probative dimensions of this purpose, but in reality these are not separable.

In formal terms, the seer’s prayer instigates an exchange or dialogue involving God or an angel. Together, these elements outline a tension between the traditional notion of covenant-based reciprocity, which is presumed by the seer and espoused in his prayer, and the claims of the apocalyptic worldview, which reflect the opinions of the authors of the texts but are voiced by the representatives of the transcendent reality—or heaven, as it is envisioned. The tension is resolved through the transmission of unimpeachable revelation, which in turn validates the author’s general argument for the worldview as a system of knowledge, a theory of justice, and an appropriate response to the historical situation. These claims are expressed by a distinctive historiography and theology of history, which carry with them certain assumptions about free will and human destiny.

Most striking in Daniel, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra is the transparency of the general argument and the extent to which it is exposed. These features are critical to the probative purpose of these books. This dimension is extraordinarily rare in apocalyptic literature, which typically states its claims without exposition, explanation, or justification. Not so with these texts. Prayer and dialogue are vehicles by which the authors present their case, even if, in their own minds, it is a fait accompli. In the exchange between the representatives of earth and heaven, readers are made privy to the rationale behind the argument for the apocalyptic theology of history. As such, they are invited to participate in a process which derives from, and thus reflects, the personal transformations of the authors themselves. Rudimentary yet remarkably effective in Daniel, the process is developed to its fullest extent in 4 Ezra. There, the seer’s prayer is part of his persistent questioning of the angel Uriel, through which the readers come to identify with Ezra’s protracted and often emotionally painful acceptance of the claims of this theology, and, to a greater extent even still, what these claims demand of him. The conversion of Ezra the seer, which Michael E. Stone poetically calls the “Odyssey of Ezra’s soul,” bestows on

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3 Historiography is the selection, arrangement, and interpretation of any set of data considered historical facts. A theology of history is the understanding of God’s saving activity in history. History in apocalypticism is not restricted to past events.