I. Introduction

The literary unity of 4 Ezra has been the subject of debate among scholarly readers of the document since the 19th century. Though those who seriously question the integrity of 4 Ezra as a whole are fewer in number today, some of the observations that initially led to source-critical explanations for the current shape of the text continue to have currency. A large part of the problem has been how—whether source critically, theologically, or even psychologically—one might reconcile the first half of the work with the way it concludes. It is generally recognized that although 4 Ezra as a whole is variously described as having “seven visions,” “seven dialogues,” or more generally “seven episodes,” the assignment of such overarching headings to the work oversimplifies how the document progresses. The problems of incoherence within 4 Ezra are reflected in both form and content. On the one hand, the first three main sections (4 Ezra 3:1–5:20; 5:21–6:34; and 6:35–9:26)
are structured as dialogical encounters between the seer Ezra (initially introduced as Salathiel) and an angelic interlocutor Uriel. On the other hand, the last three sections (11:1–12:51; 13:1–58; 14:1–48), especially numbers five and six, are more visionary in nature—although some interlocution is retained. The final episode (number seven) presents the writer as Ezra the quintessential scribe, bearer, and conveyor of revelation for his Jewish contemporaries (14:22). Ezra is called to this prominent, crucial position by a visionary encounter (14:1–22), which is told in a narrative reminiscent of Moses' call to become the agent to bring Israel out of Egypt at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The contrast in genre between the opening dialogues and concluding visions poses a problem if one inquires into the coherence of content of 4 Ezra. The terms on which the seer's questions are raised at the beginning do not appear to be the terms on which the questions are addressed and answered in the end. In the first three episodes, Ezra's searching questions, which lead to an impasse in communication between him and the angel Uriel, result in little more than notes of despair that result from Ezra's lack of understanding (e.g. 4:10–11; 5:14; 5:33–39; 6:36–37; 8:15–16; cf. 9:27). How different this is from the final episode in which the writer presents Ezra the scribe as a recipient and transmitter of revelation who is responsible for no less than ninety-four books (14:44), an extraordinary claim that rivals or even supersedes what other anonymous Second Temple writers who composed under the names of ideal figures were saying about themselves!

Of course, even if one decides to be less skeptical about the thematic unity of 4 Ezra, it is possible to argue that the disjunction between the beginning and the end in 4 Ezra is only apparent. An attempt could be made, for example, to define a "core" of Ezra's theology, whether this can be found by deriving it from the words of Uriel, the words of Ezra, or some profound combination of both.\(^3\) Whichever take one has on where to locate core convictions of the theology of 4 Ezra, it should nevertheless be remembered what the issues are that give rise to the attempt to identify this to begin with. As many readers have noted, the shifts described above within 4 Ezra raise acute questions to which the interpretations of the book respond: Are the complaints and hard questions being articulated through "Ezra" concerning the relation of Israel to humanity as a whole (e.g. 3:24–26), the stubborn

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