HOW SHOULD WE CONTEXTUALIZE PSEUDEPIGRAPHA?
IMITATION AND EMULATION IN 4 EŽRA

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The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.
—Jorge Borges, “Kafka and his Precursors”

We would all readily admit that contextualization is an essential part of historical study. If we can identify the context in which a text was produced, then we can use the context to draw conclusions about the text, and we can use the text to draw conclusions about the context. However, it is often difficult to locate the context in which a text was written and the author by whom it was composed. Indeed, even if we can identify an author or a collaborative group that was responsible for producing a text, it can sometimes still be quite a challenge to determine the text’s historical value. But for those of us who work on pseudepigraphical texts, the job is particularly challenging. First these texts deliberately efface their relations to their contexts of composition, because they present themselves as written by another author, often from another time. Second, scholars have often contextualized these texts within modern practices of authorship and composition—hence as forgery, clerical deception or plagiarism.

The problems facing those of us who work on pseudepigrapha may seem insuperable. However, we should not assume that political contextualization or religious affiliation is the only way of doing history, or the most important. I want to suggest that intellectual, cultural and spiritual practices also constitute contexts within which texts can be rendered intelligible. Instead of constituting an obstacle, authorial self-effacement should be an object of study. By considering the practices of authorial effacement and pseudepigraphic attribution, we can come to

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1 This essay is dedicated to Florentino García Martínez. His scholarship, dedication to the field, and collegiality are exemplary, which makes this paper particularly appropriate. Néelo ya ir: May the light of Professor García Martínez continue to shine ever more brightly for many years to come.
understand much about the way the unknown and unknowable authors related to their own present.

In this paper, I will focus on *4 Ezra*, a post-70 C.E. text that pseudepigraphically attributes itself to Ezra, who is said to have just experienced the destruction of the First Temple. This essay seeks to explain the pseudepigraphic claims of *4 Ezra* by situating it within the context of practices of the emulation and imitation of the sage and the struggle to overcome destruction by recovering a perfect, holy and idealized past.²

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“Ezra” in *4 Ezra* is associated with a renewed presentation of the law to the returnees from Babylon, and is also linked to the re-establishment of temple worship.³ However, that is not the only relationship with the temple that is preserved in Ezra-Nehemiah along with other traditions from the Second Temple period. *4 Ezra* participates in the ambivalence with which the newly formed Second Temple Judeans greeted the establishment of the new Temple as is found in Ezra 3:10–12.⁴ In addition, much like the “Ezra” of Neh 8:1–8, “Ezra” surely needed to present the new law (vision seven of *4 Ezra*), but first he would have to be trained as a leader who participates in the mourning of Zion (vision 4 of *4 Ezra*).⁵ The impossibility of singing again after the first exile (e.g.,

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³ E.g. Neh 8:1–8.


⁵ In Ezra 3:12–13 the re-established Temple is received with simultaneous shouts of joy and of weeping:

(12) Many of the Priests and Levites and the chiefs of the clans, the old men who had seen the first house, wept loudly at the sight of the founding of this house. Many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices. (13) The people could