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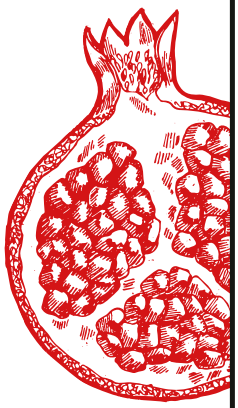

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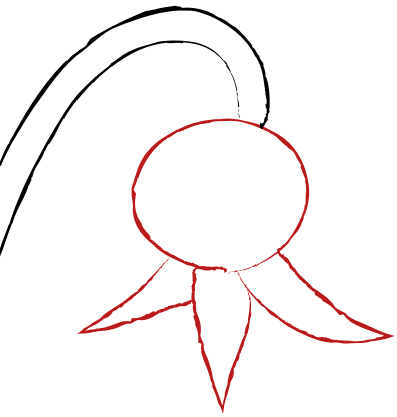

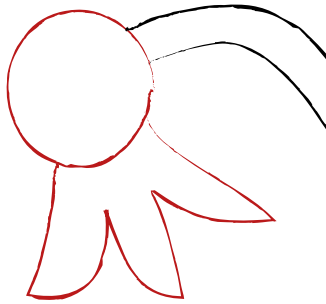

Special Issue: Hope

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THE EVIL WITHIN: HOPE AND HUMAN AGENCY IN THE POST-70 CE JEWISH APOCALYPSES

C. D. Elledge

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Abstract

Rome's triumph in the Great Jewish Revolt (66–70/74 CE) and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple inspired the renewed flourishing of literary apocalypses in ancient Judaism. Fourth Ezra (2 Esdras) and 2 Baruch interpret the crisis and offer hope to the Jewish community in ways familiar to earlier apocalyptic traditions. Yet they also advance the apocalyptic genre as a medium of intellectual debate through extended dialogues that explore questions of theodicy. The purposes of the complex literary dialogues remain an ongoing scholarly problem. Comparative analysis reveals within both dialogues an intense focus on the human will, the power of sin, and the possibilities of moral agency. While their approaches to these anthropological questions meaningfully differ, their respective dialogues, nevertheless, construct a near-term, interim ethic in which the righteous may find hope to persevere even amid their own deeply threatened moral agency. This is especially apparent in the dialogues' anxieties over human nature, their intercessory prayers, and the models of practical leadership embodied by their respective protagonists.

Le triomphe de Rome lors de la révolte juive (66–70/74 de notre ère) et la destruction du temple de Jérusalem ont inspiré un renouveau florissant des apocalypses littéraires dans le judaïsme ancien. Le Quatrième Livre d'Esdras (2 Esdras) et 2 Baruch proposent une interprétation de cette crise et créent de l'espoir pour la communauté juive d'une façon similaire aux traditions apocalyptiques antérieures. Cependant, ils font également progresser le genre apocalyptique comme outil de débat intellectuel par le biais de dialogues prolongés qui explorent des questions liées à la théodicée. La recherche continue de réfléchir aux objectifs de ces dialogues littéraires complexes. Une analyse comparative de 2 Esdras et 2 Baruch révèle que les deux dialogues insistent sur la volonté humaine, la puissance du péché et les possibilités d'agentivité morale. Bien que leurs approches de ces questions anthropologiques diffèrent de manière significative, leurs dialogues respectifs construisent une éthique provisoire à court terme dans laquelle les justes peuvent trouver l'espoir de persévérer, même si leur propre agentivité morale est profondément menacée. Cela s'exprime particulièrement dans les craintes que les dialogues révèlent quant à la nature humaine, dans leurs prières d'intercession et dans les modèles de gouvernance que leurs protagonistes respectifs incarnent.

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THE EVIL WITHIN: HOPE AND HUMAN AGENCY IN THE POST-70 CE JEWISH APOCALYPSES

C. D. Elledge

> Everyone who makes a stand and rules over his inclination and masters his inclination,
> like Moses in his time, David in his time, Ezra in his time—
> his entire generation depends upon him.
>
> —Song of Songs Rabbah 4:4

Introduction

Rome's triumph in the Great Jewish Revolt (66–70/74 CE) and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple inspired the renewed flourishing of literary apocalypses in ancient Judaism. As the apocalypses of 4 Ezra (2 Esdras) and 2 Baruch seek hope in the generation of the desperate aftermath,[1] they advance the apocalyptic genre as a medium of

[1] The dating of 4 Ezra to the late first century CE has typically rested with its typological setting "in the thirtieth year after" the Temple's destruction (4 Ezra 3:1),

intellectual debate through extended dialogues exploring questions of theodicy. Such revelatory dialogues make the literary apocalypse a medium of explicit conceptual deliberation, comparable to other forms of ancient dialogue literature. Comparative analysis of their dialogues reveals an intense focus upon moral agency, the persistence of sin, and the redemptive possibilities of the law. To be sure, both works locate ultimate redemption in the divine agency that will inaugurate the Messianic era, resurrection, and new creation. This is evident throughout the dialogues themselves[2] and within the apocalyptic revelations/interpretations that highlight each book.[3]

Yet for the authors of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, the hope of future apocalyptic deliverance raised intense questions of anthropology. Who is the human who will be able to withstand the last days and inherit final redemption? The dialogues struggle to find hope in human agency amid the problems of transgression and mortality. As a result, both books pursue an apocalyptic theodicy that converges with anthropodicy.[4] Through intense inquiry into human nature, the dialogues gradually construct a provisional interim ethic in which the righteous may find hope to persevere even amid their own deeply threatened moral agency. Contemporary examinations of hope (especially Shade 2001)

as well as its possible internal allusions to the latter years of the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE) (11:33–35, 12:28) (e.g., Stone 1990, 9–10; Longenecker 1995, 13–16). DiTommaso (1999, 3–38) qualifies chapters 11–12 as reflecting a later redactional updating of 4 Ezra (c. 218 CE). Second Baruch appears to have originated within the same late-first-century context, perhaps c. 95 CE, if "the twenty-fifth year of Jeconiah" (2 Bar 1:1) symbolically reflects the second "Exile" that began in 70 CE (Gurtner 2009, 16–18). Other scholars more cautiously estimate a range from the late first to the early second century (Whitters 2003, 149–55; Lied 2011, 245). Neither ancient text reveals knowledge of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135 CE). Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[2] 4 Ezra 4:26–43; 5:1–13; 6:1–28; 7:10–16, 25–131; 8:37–63, 9:1–13; 2 Bar 15:7–8; 20:1–6; 23:5–26:1; 48:26–52:7.

[3] 4 Ezra 9:38–10:59; 11:1–12:39; 13:1–58; 2 Bar 6–8, 27–30, 36–43, 53–76.

[4] James Crenshaw (1983, 6) emphasizes a competitive interaction between the two concepts (e.g., the vindication of God at the expense of the human being). The present article examines their interdependency in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch.

may illuminate how each work negotiates the tensions between "unconditioned transcendence" and "conditioned transcendence" in their respective constructions of hope.[5]

4 Ezra

Fourth Ezra explores the problems of human nature within one of the most formidable literary dialogues in ancient Judaism. Scholars have traditionally discerned a sevenfold structure to the book.[6] The first three units constitute a dialogue between the exilic scribe Ezra and the angel Uriel.[7] In the first round, Ezra laments the fall of Israel, as well as the more universal plight of sinful humanity in "anxious words" (3:3). In rounds two and three, Ezra fasts, prays, and receives "the spirit of understanding."[8] The dialogues, thus, take on an increasingly revelatory character, as Ezra painstakingly emerges beyond his despair over the past. In the second half of the work, dialogues give way to three visions,[9] which offer an ultimately messianic and apocalyptic resolution to Ezra's anxieties. The work concludes with a narrative that solidifies Ezra's experience of revelation and presents his final exhortation to his contemporaries (14:1–48).

While interpreters have discerned the author's perspective most clearly in the apocalyptic visions and concluding narrative,[10] the theologies within the dialogue units, as well as their larger functions, have presented a persistent challenge. Modern studies have deliberated whether

[5] See below, "Hope, Agency, and Interim Ethics." By "conditioned transcendence," Shade (2001, 179) emphasizes the expansion of human agency as it takes practical action in the construction of hope. "Unconditioned transcendence" relocates agency in an unconditionally transcendent power, such as God.

[6] Among others, Thompson (1977, 121–25); Stone (1990, 21–23); Longenecker (1995, 20–22); Hogan (2008, 1).

[7] 4 Ezra 3:1–5:20; 5:21–6:35; 6:36–9:26.

[8] 4 Ezra 5:20–22; 6:30–37.

[9] 4 Ezra 9:38–10:59; 11:1–12:39; 13:1–58.

[10] Brandenburger 1981, 149–51; Hogan 2008, 15–19; Collins 2009, 91; Stewart 2013, 384.

to identify the author's message in the voice of Uriel, or Ezra, or neither, or both (Hayman 1975, 47). Egon Brandenburger (1981, 65–67, 150–52) and Wolfgang Harnisch (1969, 64) side with Uriel, while Ezra's theology raises errant questions that the author seeks to correct. Alden Thompson (1977, 296) prioritizes Ezra's faithful skepticism and humanistic empathy over Uriel's more narrowly orthodox positions. Karina Hogan (2008, 15–19) chooses neither, as the dialogue demonstrates the insufficiency of both "covenantal" (Ezra) and "eschatological" (Uriel) sapiential traditions. Gabriele Boccaccini (2013, 76–77) emphasizes a conciliatory purpose in the dialogue, as it encompasses contradictory voices in the Jewish community with a tendency toward inclusivity. Each of these approaches discerns within the dialogue discordant traditions and sectarian conflicts within the author's Jewish context.[11]

Psychological approaches have emphasized "both." For Hermann Gunkel (1900, 339–42, 348), the dialogue reveals the "double-consciousness" (*Doppelbewüsztsein*) of its author, his "inner conflict" between human doubt and divine wisdom. Michael Stone (1990, 30–32) develops this approach through a linear reading in which Ezra dynamically emerges beyond his initial despair to fulfill his calling as consolatory prophet to Israel. All major units of the book hail Ezra himself as the unparalleled prophetic authority of his day, a figure of immense piety, humility, and righteousness.[12] As Ezra is "sage, lawgiver, and prophet" (Gore-Jones 2016, 214; 2021, 399), it remains difficult to dismiss his voice entirely when assessing the author's message (Collins 2009, 88). Ezra's transformation becomes apparent by the first apocalyptic vision, as the disconsolate survivor of exile now becomes the prophetic comforter of Israel (9:27–10:59).[13] The agonizing dialogue units awaken this "progressive intensification" of Ezra's consciousness (Merkur 2004, 329), as he emerges from disputant, to questioner, to learner (Stone 1990, 81–82).

Some interpreters thus distinguish between the earlier "Ezra" (who is often "wrong") and the more fully developing "Ezra" (whose views

[11] See also Brand 2013, 137; Stewart 2013, 373–91.

[12] 4 Ezra 6:32; 7:44; 8:51–54, 62; 10:57; 12:36; 13:53–56.

[13] Longenecker 1995, 59–64, 96–98; Henze 2011, 149; Stuckenbruck 2013, 137–50.

gradually reflect the author's).[14] Ezra's emergence concludes with his final exhortation to keep the law in hope of eschatological redemption (14:27–36). Such confidence offers vivid contrast to his initial bewilderment and despair. The psychic progression of Ezra may thus advance an "experiential," rather than strictly "rational," theodicy (Thompson 1977, 295).[15] The drama of Ezra's emergence may have functioned as a paradigm of hope for the ancient author, who sought "to guide the reader through a transformation similar to that undergone by the protagonist" (Najman 2014, 23, 48–49, 62).[16]

The perspective taken in what follows shares a developmental and positive approach to Ezra's voice, further emphasizing how his intercessions for sinful humanity mark a distinct and underappreciated moment in his emergence. Within the dialogue units and prior to the first, pivotal apocalyptic vision of the book, Ezra stands alongside the formidable intercessors of Israel's earlier traditions. Faced with despair over human nature, Ezra actively constructs a daring and hopeful pathway in which the righteous few may exercise moral agency by interceding for the sinful many. His gradual discovery of this intercessory vocation further reveals an important contribution of the dialogue units: the formation of an interim ethic. Ezra and "the few" like him transcend despair to forge a viable form of hopeful agency that preserves the larger community in the present world and prepares it for final redemption.

Human Nature

The dialogue's exploration of the anthropology of the created human with their mysterious capacity for evil comprises a distinct conceptual achievement of the ancient author (Violet 1924, 5). The stark anthropological concern emerges all the more clearly amid the absence of external, dualistic powers that drive humans toward transgression. As Boccaccini observes: "There is no devil, no fallen angels, no cosmic

[14] DiTommaso 2013, 130; Zurawski 2018, 178–79.

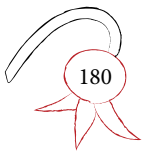
[15] Cf. Longenecker 1995, 96–98; Du Rand 2008, 124; Gore-Jones 2016, 234.

[16] See also Najman 2007, 529–36; Moo 2011, 33.

conflict" (2013, 73). The dialogue opens with Ezra's lamentation over the "evil heart" (*cor malignum*). While God planted the Torah within the human, Ezra can only bewail the conquest of the evil heart over mass humanity:

> Yet you did not take away from them the evil heart, in order that your law might bear fruit within them. For the first Adam, bearing the heavy burden of the evil heart, transgressed and was conquered (*victus est*), as were also those who were born from him. And the disease (*infirmitas*)[17] has been made permanent. The law was in the heart of the people along with the evil root. Yet what was good departed, while the evil remained.[18]

Adam's transgression reveals an inherent, constitutional problem within human creation, one that even the law itself does not immediately remedy. The human plight transcends the physical evils of suffering and mortality that have resulted from Adam's transgression. Through the "evil heart," an internal capacity for moral evil has burdened, conquered, and corrupted humanity from creation. Miryam Brand (2013, 130–31) clarifies that such moral evil is not simply a consequence of Adam's sin, but rather its mysterious cause.[19]



The evil heart is a metaphorical "burden" that weakens the human. Combative metaphors express how humanity is "conquered" by it (3:21). It has become a perennial "infirmity," an "inherited weakness" (Stone 1990, 65), a "character defect" (Zurawski 2018, 182). The dialogue stops just short of directly attributing the evil heart to God (Stone 1990, 63, 95), even as it more subtly evokes the probability.[20] Uriel acknowledges, perhaps with keen use of the divine passive, that a "grain of evil seed *was sown* within the heart of Adam from the beginning" (*granum seminis mali seminatum est in corde Adam ab initio*; 4:30). Likewise,

[17] Or "weakness" (Stone 1990, 65; Zurawski 2018, 182).

[18] 4 Ezra 3:20–22. See also 4 Ezra 9:27–37. Unless otherwise noted, translations of 4 Ezra are based upon the Latin editions of Robert Bensly and Montague James (1895), as well as A. Frederik Klijn (1983).

[19] See Harnisch 1969, 44; Thompson 1977, 330–37; Burkes 2003, 195; Zurawski 2018, 180; García 2021, 86.

[20] Zurawski 2018, 181: "There is little reason not to view God as the creator and implanter of the evil seed."

humans bear an "evil inclination *formed* within them" (*cum eis plasmatum cogitamentum malum*; 7:92) through creation (cf. Gen 2:7).[21] Both Ezra and the angel utilize organic metaphors ("root," 3:22, 8:53; "grain," 4:30) implying the dynamic "growth" of the evil heart (Harnisch 1969, 51). While perhaps only a small "grain" or "root" at creation, it has produced a catastrophic harvest as each generation habitually acts upon it (4:30–32, 7:48). A dangerous implication of Ezra's opening lament is that the evil heart has nullified the redemptive possibilities of Israel's law and even eschatological salvation altogether (cf. 7:65–69). The dilemma raises further despair concerning the possibilities of righteous agency within the present age.

Uriel's response to Ezra's doom-ridden lament is twofold. First, Ezra's anxiety arises from the imperfections of human understanding (4:11; see Stone 1990, 78). The human dilemma is not only moral, but also epistemological. The question "why is the heart evil?" remains an impenetrable mystery (4:4–5). Second, Ezra has not reckoned the role of eschatological time within the divine plan (4:22–5:11). He has focused only on creation, transgression, and exile within the present world, in which God's justice cannot be fully realized (4:27–29). Indeed, as all three dialogue units proceed, they methodically begin with Ezra's "anxious words" of grievous complaint about existing circumstances,[22] and they conclude with angelic discourses concerning future "signs" of the end.[23] The structure pedagogically admonishes Ezra away from the past and toward the future.

In round two, Ezra complains of the historical reality of exile, in which God elected one people only to hand them over to the multitude of transgressors. The elect have fared poorly at the hands of divine justice. In addressing Ezra's anxieties, Uriel offers crucial clarification concerning the evil heart. Only in the "end" will "the heart of (earth's) inhabitants ... be transformed and converted into a different disposition" (*et mutabitur cor inhabitantium et convertetur in sensum alium*; 6:26). Redemption demands a new heart, transformed only in the messianic

[21] Elsewhere, Ezra implies that the deity created the world "without help" (3:4).

[22] 4 Ezra 3:1–36; 5:21–30; 6:35–59.

[23] 4 Ezra 4:52–5:13; 6:11–28; 8:63–9:13.

era, finally free from its grievous malady. The eschatological "harvest" will reap away (4:28–29) the "evil that has been sown," so that "good" may finally flourish (Moo 2011, 108).

After more fasting, Ezra comes out of the corner for the final and most extensive round of dialogue. Now Ezra complains of the disparity between the orderly world of creation (6:38–59) and the current place of Israel: "If the world has indeed been created for us, why do we not possess our world as an inheritance?" (6:59; NRSV). Here, Ezra returns to Israel's national election amid its present endangerments. For the third time, Uriel redirects Ezra from the past toward the future (7:16). He also counters Ezra's national concern with a universal argument. The order of creation and human nature became alienated from their original harmony "when Adam transgressed my statutes" (7:10–14). As a result, the physical evils of suffering and mortality predominate (cf. 3:7, 10). While there remains a path of righteous agency for the human being, it has now become a journey against the inertia of the present, corruptible world.

The earlier metaphors of Adam's primal defeat (3:20–22) now resurface in Uriel's rousing call that humans must understand their place within the arena of a grave and decisive contest:

> This is the meaning of the contest (*certaminis*) which every man who is born on earth shall wage, that if he is defeated (*victus fuerit*) he shall suffer what you have said, but if he is victorious (*vicerit*) he shall receive what I have said. For this is the way of which Moses, while he was alive, spoke to the people saying, "Choose for yourself life, that you may live!"[24]

This is one of few moments in the dialogue that a text from the Torah is explicitly referenced (cf. 6:38; Najman 2014, 93). Uriel interprets Deuteronomy 30:19 as affirming the integrity of free will, a view found in other writings.[25] Ben Sira, in particular, interprets the same Deuteronomic language as assurance that the deity never compels anyone to sin (Sir 15:17–20). For Uriel, the Deuteronomic injunction

[24] 4 Ezra 7:127–29; OTP.

[25] Cf. 2 Bar 19:1; Henze 2011, 31.

applies universally to "every man who is born on earth." Thus, there is no excuse for any human transgression (Hogan 2008, 90).

In arguing for the rugged survival of righteous agency, Uriel affirms that through the Torah the human may yet "choose life." Those who have "kept the ways of the Most High" will inherit everlasting life "because they have contended (*certati sunt*) with great labor in order to conquer the evil inclination (*vincerent cum eis plasmatum cogitamentum malum*) formed within them" (7:92). The evil heart has pervasively damaged the human being's divinely created place in the world. Even so, the dialogue teaches Ezra that the law "remains in its glory" (9:37) despite human failure (cf. 7:20–25). Uriel repeatedly consoles Ezra that he, too, is living proof that the righteous few may conquer in their dreadful conflict with evil (8:51–54). Righteousness will be excruciating, yet it remains possible for the noble few.[26]

There remain further tensions in how Ezra and Uriel understand the implications of the "evil heart." Uriel resolutely asserts the survival of individual free will, in spite of the "evil heart." The wicked "received freedom (*libertatem*), but they despised the Most High" (8:56).[27] From this perspective, the deity's historic judgments have been righteous, necessitated by the devices of the free-acting human that have endangered the entire creation (9:20).[28] Ezra's own anxious words, however, reflect a more empathetically human perspective, in which the "permanent malady" of the evil heart demands penitence and divine mercy upon an imperfect creation.[29]

[26] As Hogan (2008, 116, 139) observes, the evil heart may not afflict all people equally.

[27] Cf. 4:26–32; 7:21–25, 72.

[28] For Uriel, even God must "labor" against human freedom, so that a remnant may be "perfected" (9:22).

[29] Ezra's final exhortation may express a synthesis of the two approaches (14:34): "If, therefore, you will rule over your own disposition (*imperaveritis sensui vestro*) and instruct your own heart (*erudieritis cor vestrum*), you shall be preserved alive and obtain mercy after death" (14:34). While reflecting the more rugged theology of Uriel, Ezra also insists that, even for the victorious, salvation will remain a matter of divine "mercy" (Thompson 1977, 317; Burkes 2003, 198–99, 228; Hogan 2007, 549).

Intercession

A significant achievement of the carefully formulated dialogue is that each angelic proposition, however immaculately devised, leads Ezra only to proportional levels of despair. As Uriel presents eschatological resolutions to the problems of divine justice (7:26–44), these very instructions achieve an adverse effect upon Ezra:

> And now I see that the world to come will bring delight to few, but torments to many. For an evil heart has grown up in us (*increvit enim in nos cor malum*) that has alienated us from these things, and has brought us into corruption and the ways of death, and has shown us the paths of perdition and removed us far from life—and that not merely for a few but almost all who have been created.[30]

If the evil heart raises dire questions concerning the redemptive possibilities of the law, it equally threatens eschatological redemption.[31] How can the human observe the law and enter into life if the evil heart reigns? How can the world to come promise reward if only few can merit it? It is clear from the linear structure of the book that the hopes of the author ultimately reside in future Messianic and apocalyptic deliverance. Reflexively, however, these very hopes only ricochet back to the problems of human nature expressed within the dialogues if the path to life is to become viable for "all who have been created."[32]

Faced with despair over the evil heart, Ezra turns toward the pathway of intercession, which dominates the concluding rounds of dialogue (7:102–8:36).[33] Ezra inquires: On the day of judgment, can the righteous few "make excuse for," "absolve," or "apologize for" (*excusare*)

[30] 4 Ezra 7:47–48; NRSV.

[31] Willett 1989, 71; Moo 2011, 73; Gore-Jones 2020, 63, 92.

[32] Cf. Du Rand 2008, 133: "The eschatological solution is only viable if the issue of sin is solved."

[33] Without consensus, scholars have treated the puzzling intercessory episodes. See Gunkel 1900, 338–40; Thompson 1977, 301–3, 315–18; Cook 1988, 89–100; Willett 1989, 68–71; Stone 1990, 247–89; Bauckham 1998, 136–44; Trumbower 2001, 31–34, 50–53; Burkes 2003, 207–12; Najman 2014, 130–32; Brutti 2022, 199–206. The final round of dialogue increasingly resembles the "intercessory

the wicked? Can they "intercede (*deprecari*) on their behalf before the Most High—fathers for sons or sons for fathers, brothers for brothers, relatives for their kinsmen, or friends for friends?" (7:102–03; trans. Stone 1990, 247). His intercessory proposition accepts the angelic premise that the righteous are few and the wicked many,[34] yet advances a hopeful pathway in which the righteous few may intercede for the sinful masses. In spite of Ezra's ingenious proposition, Uriel's answer is resolute denial: "Everyone shall bear his own righteousness and unrighteousness" (7:105; trans. Stone 1990, 147). Individual retribution marks the angelic theodicy. On the day of judgment, the righteous cannot atone for the wicked, nor can the wicked pollute the righteous. Intercession remains a quality of the present world. Its function will have forever ceased on the last day.[35]

Ezra's intercessory barrage will not relent, however. He returns to his argument, supporting his strategy with eight compelling Midrashic *exempla* of granted intercessions (7:106–11):

1. Abraham for Sodom (Gen 18)
2. Moses in the wilderness (Exod 32–34; Num 14, 21; cf. Deut 9:18–29)
3. Joshua for Israel (Josh 7)
4. Samuel for Saul (1 Sam 7, 12)
5. David in plague (2 Sam 24)
6. Solomon in the sanctuary (1 Kgs 8)
7. Elijah in famine and death (1 Kgs 17–18)
8. Hezekiah in Assyrian invasion (2 Kgs 19; Isa 37).

The carefully constructed catalogue reveals the author's studious inquiry into intercession. Among the diverse intercessory precedents, none is explicitly denied. A few episodes conclude with immediately granted intercessions,[36] whereas others feature within the more ambiguous drama

dialogues" (Miller 1994, 267, 272; cf. Reventlow 1986, 236; Balentine 1993, 132) of earlier scriptural traditions (e.g., Gen 18; Exod 32–34; Amos 7:1–9).

[34] Thompson 1977, 328; Najman 2014, 132.

[35] Stone 1990, 282: "Until the judgment, the complementary qualities of mercy and repentance are active ... In judgment they are withdrawn."

[36] For example, Joshua 7; Numbers 21; 1 Samuel 7:8–9; 2 Samuel 24; 1 Kings 17–18; 2 Kings 19.

of the divine–human relationship.[37] The catalogue immediately locates Ezra himself among these formidable intercessors.[38] More than this, Ezra's own intercessions will reflect the rhetoric of these precedents. Like Moses (Exod 34:6–9; Num 14:17–19), Ezra will implore pardon on the basis of the deity's merciful attributes (4 Ezra 7:132–40). Like Solomon (1 Kgs 8:46), Ezra will plead that there is no one who has not sinned (4 Ezra 8:34–36),[39] a claim that takes on specialized meanings in light of his *aporia* over the "evil heart."

Capitalizing upon these precedents, Ezra projects the possibilities of intercession into the eschatological future: if "the righteous have prayed for the ungodly" (*exoraverunt justi pro impiis*) in this present age, how will it not also be the same on the last day? (7:111). Ezra's argument emphasizes continuity (Cf. Collins 2009, 84). Uriel counters with discontinuity (Bauckham 1998, 143). Intercession has been a part of this present corruptible world (7:112–13), yet "no one will then be able to have mercy on someone who has been condemned in the judgment, or to harm someone who is victorious (*vicerit*)" (7:115; NRSV). Ezra has erred in imagining that intercession can occur at the final judgment, even if Uriel subtly concedes its legitimacy within the present corruptible world.[40] Denial of intercession is familiar to the Hebrew Bible,[41] as well as the Enochic Book of Watchers and Dream Visions.[42]

[37] For example, Genesis 18; Exodus 32–34; Numbers 14; 1 Samuel 12; 1 Kings 8. See Reventlow 1986, 237; Miller 1994, 262.

[38] On intercession as an authority function, see Reventlow 1986, 229; Balentine 1993, 50–64; Parker 2006, 81. One may compare the petitionary status of the Qumran Maskil, as interpreted by Judith Newman (2018, 112–15, 125–26).

[39] Cf. 4 Ezra 4:38, 7:46–48. On this intercessory argument, see Bauckham 1998, 139–40.

[40] Trumbower 2001, 30; Brutti 2022, 201.

[41] Jeremiah 15:1; cf. 7:16, 11:14, 14:11–12; 1 Kings 14:1–18; 2 Kings 1; Reventlow 1986, 260; Miller 1994, 264.

[42] Trumbower 2001, 53; Parker 2006, 80. In the Book of Watchers, the fallen watchers petition Enoch to intercede, yet his petition is denied (1 En 12–16). In the Dream Visions, the angelic witness and Enoch petition God repeatedly for Israel (89:57–58, 69–71, 76–77; 90:3; cf. 84:1–6). In every instance, the deity remains silent until the predetermined judgment is complete.

Such denials insist that judgment must run its terrible course until the end (Jer 15:1). Even "failed" intercessions, however, reveal the prophets' intense identification with their people, as they fulfill their vocation amid its agonizing burdens (1 Sam 12:23).[43] The denial of intercession will only lead to Ezra's bold, even defiant, return to intercession as the dialogue approaches its conclusion.

Uriel's rejection casts Ezra into outright despair, as he further laments Adam's transgression: "O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the calamity was not yours alone but ours also who are your descendants!" (7:118; NRSV). Faced with the full gravity of the human dilemma, Ezra's final stand appeals centrally to the attributes of God's mercy. The Most High is "merciful ... gracious ... patient ... bountiful ... abundant in compassion" (7:132–37). Interpreters have long detected that Ezra's appeal offers a Midrashic expansion of Exodus 34:6–7, where Yahweh proclaims the divine attributes of mercy and justice in the aftermath of the broken tablets of the law.[44] Here, Ezra's earlier allusions to Mosaic intercession explicitly resurface in his own petitionary rhetoric. In words, as well as stature, Ezra's intercessions position him as an increasingly Mosaic figure.

Like those of Moses and other intercessors, Ezra's approach to intercession also involves penitence. Daniel Boyarin (1972, 30–34) demonstrates that Ezra's intercessions bear commonalities with later Jewish penitential liturgy.[45] From this perspective, Ezra's frequent lamentations over human nature, while they raise profound questions over divine justice, simultaneously fulfill a penitential role. Uriel commends his penitent humility (4 Ezra 8:48). Penitence and prayer for mercy also rank among the clearest commonalities between the hero of 4 Ezra and his "scriptural" namesake (Neh 9:1–38), in spite of their many

[43] Reventlow 1986, 260.

[44] Thompson 1977, 201; Stone 1990, 260–61; Longenecker 1995, 54; Hogan 2008, 145.

[45] Commonalities include confessing sin (8:31), recalling episodes of granted intercession (7:106–11), and listing the merciful attributes of God (7:132–40; e.g., Exod 34:6–7).

differences.[46] If one may bring Daniel's penitential prayer (Dan 9:1–19) into the picture, Ezra's penitence within the dialogues may further prepare him for revelation (Portier-Young 2011, 254). As he brings his "penitential" intercession to fruition, Ezra focuses on the very heart of the deity's merciful nature.[47] For Ezra, the perplexities of the human condition can only be reconciled through the hope of divine mercy, without which the creation itself would cease to exist (4 Ezra 7:137). His defiant intercessions demonstrate that, while he has learned through the dialogue, he refuses to capitulate. In spite of the prevalence of sin, Ezra stubbornly rises to conviction and moral agency. Perhaps he can even see what angels cannot.

Heartened by the necessity of divine mercy, Ezra focuses next on God's diligent care for the created human in their frailty (4 Ezra 8:4–36). His intercessory strategy skillfully maneuvers between creationary and covenantal claims.[48] The deity's maintenance of creation should demand mercy toward Israel. Most pertinent to his anxieties over human nature, Ezra explicitly prays for "a seed for our heart and cultivation of our understanding so that fruit may be produced" that will lead to life (4 Ezra 8:6). Remarkable in this case is Ezra's vocation to intercede in light of the specific problems of the human "heart." His plea may further reflect the prophetic hope of a "new heart" within God's people to keep the law (Ezek 36:26–27).[49] The claims of the creature upon the creator resound in an intensely monotheistic corollary: "For you alone exist, and we are a work of your hands" (4 Ezra 8:7). Monotheism compels the deity to hear the plight of a suffering creation.

Moving prenatal, birth, and infancy metaphors follow (8:7–14). Ezra applies them directly to Israel:

[46] On the differences between Ezra in the Hebrew Bible and 4 Ezra, see Stone 1990, 37–39; Hogan 2008, 133; Whitters 2013, 571; Najman 2014, 51, 58; Mroczek 2016, 168.

[47] On this intercessory tactic, see Balentine 1993, 132; Miller 1994, 268; Bauckham 1998, 139–40.

[48] Moo 2011, 73–82; cf. Longenecker 1995, 54–55; Collins 2009, 95–96.

[49] Moo 2011, 123. For a position against the association, see Hogan 2008, 116.

> About all humankind you know best; but I will speak about your people for whom I am grieved ... I will pray before thee for myself and for them, for I see the failings of us who dwell in the land, and I have heard of the swiftness of the judgment that is to come.[50]

Refocusing away from speculative intercessions for humanity at the last judgment, Ezra returns to the problem of "your people." He penitently acknowledges Israel's transgressions and accepts angelic instruction to prepare for "the judgment that is to come." His intercessory strategy now implores that God will attend to the righteous within Israel, rather than the wicked alone (8:26–28; NRSV). In reminding God of the righteous few, Ezra may recall Abraham's intercession for Sodom. Hogan further compares the penitential prayers of Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9.[51] If the evil heart has made righteousness an arduous task, God must all the more acknowledge those "who have kept your covenants amid afflictions" (8:27). The wickedness of the wicked many must not annihilate the righteousness of the righteous few.

The powerful intercession concludes with a declaration that takes Ezra's petition to its uttermost implications:

> For in truth there is no one among those who have been born who has not acted wickedly; among those who have existed there is no one who has not done wrong. For in this, O Lord, your righteousness and goodness will be declared, when you are merciful to those who have no store of good works.[52]

The intercessory tactic that all have sinned is attested among Ezra's own intercessory precedents (1 Kgs 8:46). Yet it achieves specialized meaning within 4 Ezra's exploration of the "evil heart." Through his uniquely empathetic "sensitivity to the human dilemma" (Thompson 1977, 328), Ezra reveals how even the afflicted righteous have transgressed in their contest against the evil heart (cf. 7:46, 67–69). On the basis of the struggling righteous within Israel, Ezra hopes to move the deity

[50] 4 Ezra 8:15–19; OTP.

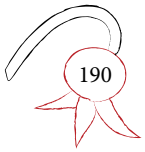
[51] Hogan 2008, 133. Cook (1988, 99) compares "penitential Psalms" (e.g., Ps 38, 51, 73, 130). Cf. 2 Baruch 1:15–3:8 (Venter 2005, 408–13).

[52] 4 Ezra 8:35–36; NRSV.

toward mercy upon sinful humanity as a whole. As Bruce Longenecker expresses the matter, "the defender of Israel has become the defender of the human race" (1995, 56). The conclusion of the petition demands that the ultimate vindication of God's righteousness will be achieved through mercy upon sinful humanity as a whole.

Ezra's intercession now achieves a response remarkably different from his earlier inquiry:

> Some things you have spoken rightly, and it will turn out according to your words. For indeed, I will not concern myself about the fashioning of those who have sinned, or about their death, their judgment, or their destruction; but I will rejoice over the creation of the righteous, over their pilgrimage also, and their salvation, and their receiving their reward.[53]



Ezra's intercession has at least won assurance that God will focus upon the struggling righteous, their arduous journey in the present world, and their eschatological reward. While interpreters have sometimes viewed Ezra's foray into intercession as a dead end,[54] Uriel vindicates Ezra and promises that "some things" have been achieved through his prayers. If Ezra's voice aligns more closely with the author's own perspective as the book develops,[55] then it would appear that Ezra's intercessions model a righteous stance toward human sin within the present world.

One may question whether this moment actually constitutes a change in the ways of divine justice. Is the deity of 4 Ezra as dialogical as the one whom Abraham and Moses inclined toward mercy? God may hardly be said to have "repented" (cf. Exod 32:12–14) in 4 Ezra.[56] Both Uriel and Ezra testify to the deity's predetermined plan for the grand scale of creation (Moo 2011, 42–43). In its epochal sweep, there seems

[53] 4 Ezra 8:37–39; NRSV.

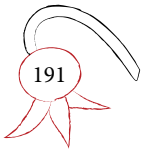
[54] Stewart 2013, 382: "Ezra's impassioned pleas for mercy and compassion accomplish nothing." See also Thompson 1977, 318; Longenecker 1995, 99–100.

[55] Stone 1990, 81–82; DiTommaso 2013, 130; Zurawski 2018, 178–79.

[56] All along, Uriel has emphasized God's favor for the righteous few (4 Ezra 7:59–61, 131; 9:1–13).

little to suggest that humans can sway the deity's predetermined will.[57] In its finite details, however, humans retain a limited range of initiative to choose their own place within the structures of creation. As Lorenzo DiTommaso (2013, 123) insists, this is not a contradiction. Ezra seems unable to alter the deity's more infinite "way." Yet he achieves a potent realignment of mission in the present hour that will aid the righteous in their more finite struggle with human weakness. Through the process of fasting, penitence, argument, and intercession, Ezra and the deity now turn from the terrifying retributions of the past toward preparing a remnant for final salvation.

Ezra remains contentious in the aftermath of his intercession. He hardly retreats into self-abnegation.[58] Nor will our author vindicate God at humans' expense. Uriel dichotomizes between mass humanity, who are like many seeds sown into the earth, and the righteous few, who alone take root and live (8:41). Ezra counters that the seeds must have "rain in due season" to grow (8:42–43), a subtle redirection of the analogy back to divine responsibility (García 2021, 86). Nor are humans mere seeds:



> But man, who has been formed by your hands and is called your own image because he is made like you, and for whose sake you have formed all things—have you also made him like the farmer's seed? No, O Lord who are over us! But spare your people and have mercy on your inheritance, for you have mercy on your own creation.[59]

Ezra reinforces his intercession, emphasizing the unique claims that human creation has upon the creator (cf. Miller 1994, 271). Emboldened by intercession, perhaps he even gains momentary leverage. In this instance, the words of Job 16:21 may surely be applied to Ezra: "He will argue with God for a man, as a human for his fellow."[60]

[57] 4 Ezra 4:27, 36–37, 40; 6:1–6, 20; 7:25–44, 70–74.

[58] Contrast Crenshaw 1983, 6: "Self-abnegation lies at the heart of all theodicy. Only as the individual fades into nothingness can the deity achieve absolute pardon."

[59] 4 Ezra 8:44–45; OTP.

[60] On the passage, see Parker 2006, 84.

Ezra's intercessions thus result in an intensely negotiated settlement that is at least moderately rational. Aspects of each interlocutor's voice are somewhat roughly justified together. The reader receives neither confirmation, nor denial, regarding Ezra's intercession for universal humanity.[61] Whether God must accept what the human has become, so strongly asserted by Ezra, remains an imagined possibility. Uriel's own instruction narrows the application of Ezra's intercessions to the struggling righteous, who like Ezra himself may rest assured of mercy (8:46–61, 9:21–22).[62] At least this much has been achieved by Ezra's bold intercessory stand.[63] Thus, it seems hasty to conclude entirely that "an intellectual compromise" between the two voices of the dialogue "is impossible" (Hogan 2008, 157). The dialogue at least achieves a missional reorientation toward the redemption of a righteous remnant and stands in continuity with the concluding visions of the book.

Leadership

The dialogue's conceptual reorientation toward a hopeful future positions Ezra himself as the righteous agent who will prepare his people for eschatological redemption. Early in the work, Ezra isolates himself from the petitions of his people (Markley 2011, 116–17). He does not yet possess the revelation to "shepherd" his endangered "flock" (5:16–19), falling short of the prowess of his "scriptural" namesake (Neh 8:1–3). Yet as he emerges through the revelatory dialogues and visions, Ezra publicly declares his intercessory role "to pray on account of the desolation of Zion and to seek mercy on account of the humiliation of our

[61] Cf. Thompson 1977, 321: "It is the God of mercy whom the author wishes to serve, but in the end, it is the righteous judge who remains"; Hogan 2008, 149: "The author is more sympathetic to Ezra's position"; Collins 2009, 87: "Ezra at least argues that there should be a place for mercy, even if it is not apparent."

[62] A reader of BT Rosh Hashanah 17b might have concluded that Ezra's penitent recitation of God's merciful attributes (Exod 34:6–7) would assuredly have received compassion. Richard Bauckham (1998, 138) describes a more certain assurance of mercy in the Armenian version.

[63] Willett 1989, 70; Najman 2014, 134.

sanctuary" (12:48; NRSV). Here, his intercessions no longer concern the "evil heart" but rather the national-cultic concerns of the book's concluding visions.[64] In spite of the shift in focus, intercession remains a central feature of Ezra's religious mission.

There remains an intercessory plea, as well, within Ezra's prayers in the book's concluding narrative. Ezra receives the apparent twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon, as well as seventy additional works of esoteric revelation (14:37–48). It is thus through Ezra himself that the Torah, whose physical copies perished in exile (4:23), is now revealed anew.[65] Ezra actively intercedes for the spirit-inspired revelation, "so that people may be able to find the path, and that those who want to live in the last days may do so" (14:22). Given the intercessory tone of the prayer for the "people" and "those who want to live," the author may present the scriptural revelation as an answer to Ezra's repeated pleas for divine mercy. Through the new scriptural revelation, the people may indeed "find the path" and "live in the last days."

The esoteric books, reserved for the wise, further accentuate the role of the righteous few, who are like Ezra (8:51).[66] While the problems of human nature will be resolved only at the eschatological advent, the figure of Ezra offers a complementary, interim ethic in which righteous agency is safeguarded within the hands of a "remnant by merit."[67] Najman considers the possibility that Ezra serves as a model of religious perfection to be imitated (2014, 48, 62). If so, "the few" like Ezra will also fast, repent, and intercede. They will "rule over" their own "disposition" and "instruct" their own "heart" (14:34). For the pseudonymous author, tortured by the failures of the past, hope demands a sacred, reliable place in which it can safely gain root within a corrupted world. Until the end, Ezra—and a few like him—exemplify the "good soil" in which hope tangibly survives. With its concern for the righteous elite, interpreters have sometimes viewed the author's theology as a "covenantal redefinition" that narrows "the scope of divine grace ... limiting

[64] Such pleas for mercy resemble those of Daniel (9:16–19; cf. Zech 1:12–17).

[65] Najman 2014, 69–71; Gore-Jones 2021, 399.

[66] See also 4 Ezra 8:62; cf. 3:11–27; 7:8, 44; 8:3; 13:53–55.

[67] Thompson 1977, 303; cf. Longenecker 1995, 104; Collins 2009, 92.

covenant membership to include only a remnant" (Longenecker 1995, 31, 99–100). Perhaps most striking is that while the author clearly views the "many" of his own day as sinful, he nevertheless exemplifies in Ezra a hopeful, pleading, penitent, and intercessory stance toward all Israel and universal humanity.

2 Baruch

In its numerous comparisons with 4 Ezra, the apocalypse of 2 Baruch has too often been considered theologically and stylistically less daring and more conventional in approach.[68] These very features, however, make 2 Baruch more accessible and "pastoral" (Gore-Jones 2020, 19). Comparisons between the two remain mutually illuminating, revealing how 2 Baruch advances its own exploration of hope amid the problems of human nature. Scholarship once emphasized that 2 Baruch contained a sevenfold structure, comparable to that of 4 Ezra.[69] Yet as Henze demonstrates, the book flows more discursively through multiple genres that cannot be reduced to a heptadic structure.[70] Dialogues, prayers, narratives, public speeches, visions, and epistles offer complementary discourses in which the book explores its major concerns (Henze 2011, 36–43). Three rounds of dialogue emerge,[71] as Baruch discourses directly with the deity. The unmediated dialogues greatly reduce the interpretive problems of locating the author's perspective, when compared with the discordant voices of Ezra and Uriel.

[68] For example, Thompson 1977, 312: "II Baruch takes a rather superficial view of the problem of moral evil and does not begin to approach the depth of feeling demonstrated by IV Ezra."

[69] For example, Murphy 1985, 11–29; also Bogaert 1969; Thompson 1977, 121–25; Sayler 1984.

[70] Mark Whitters (2003, 36) emphasizes a threefold structure at the core of the book, organized by apocalyptic revelations (27–28, 36–37, 53), interpretations (28–30, 38–43, 54–74), and public addresses (31–34, 44–46, 77–87).

[71] 2 Baruch 13:1–20:6, 22:1–30:5, 48:26–52:7; Henze 2011, 136.

Human Nature

Like 4 Ezra, the book avoids reference to dualistic entities, allowing for a more intensive focus upon the human being's own capacity for sin.[72] Yet 2 Baruch never utilizes the problematic phrase "evil heart."[73] The tragic implications of Adam's transgression profoundly diminish, as 2 Baruch moves beyond collective understandings of sin by emphasizing individual responsibility. Baruch realizes, relatively early in the book, that "while many have sinned in time, still others, not a few, have been righteous" (21:11). Like 4 Ezra, the book utilizes the language of conflict, struggle, and prize to express the agonies of doing good in the present age. As the deity admonishes: "This world is to them a contest (*ʾagonā*) and toil (*ʿamlā*) with much trouble. And that which will come, a crown with great glory" (15:8). Baruch himself further regards final redemption as an act of divine mercy, even for the vigilant righteous.[74] Many, however—and not a few (!)—have prevailed, affirming the integrity of the human being in spite of the consequences of transgression.

In decisive contrast with 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch narrows the implications of Adam's sin to individual volition, a power that humans retain despite primordial transgression. Baruch himself confesses:

> For, although Adam sinned first and has brought death upon all who were not in his own time, yet each of them who has been born from him has prepared for himself the coming torment. And further, each of them has chosen for himself the coming glory.[75]

Adam's transgression extends its consequences in the form of death, which pervades the present, corruptible world. The most dreadful consequences of Adam's sin thus concern mortality (21:23) and physical

[72] The primordial sin of the angels is acknowledged. Even here, Adam's sin was the cause of angelic transgression, not *vice versa*. Some angels freely chose to follow Adam's example, while the majority remained righteous (56:10–14). For angels and humans, sin remains a choice, not a compulsion.

[73] Murphy 1985, 34: "The Adam theme is at the periphery of his thought."

[74] 2 Baruch 75:5–6; 77:7; 84:10–11.

[75] 2 Bar 54:15; OTP.

evil.[76] These may pose moral consequences, as death and scarcity lead to "pride," violence, false worship, and "passion" (56:6). Second Baruch frequently utilizes the term "corruption" (*ḥbālā*) in a dual sense.[77] It embraces the mortality that reigns over the present age, yet it also characterizes those who through their own volition replicate Adam's sin and experience its consequences.[78] Thus, "corruption will take those who belong to it, and life those who belong to it" (42:7; trans. Gurtner 2009). As Rebecca Harris interprets the role of volition, the righteous willingly internalize the glory of the Torah through obedience, leading to everlasting life, even as the wicked internalize the corruptibility of the present age, leading to everlasting death (Harris 2019, 101–8). Neither group was fated to its destiny (15:6).

This leads Baruch to a declaration that offers a stunning contrast to Ezra's lamentation over the evil heart:

> But now, turn yourselves to destruction, you unrighteous ones who are living now, for you will be visited suddenly, since you have once rejected the understanding of the Most High. For his works have not taught you, nor has the artful work of his creation which has existed always persuaded you. Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become our own Adam.[79]

Where Ezra mourns judgment, Baruch welcomes it, as he individualizes the nature of Adam's sin. The first human ancestor becomes the prototype of each human, who exercises free human agency in a world where good and evil, life and death, stand before them.[80] Baruch's perspective

[76] 2 Baruch 14:19; 19:8; 21:9–17; 23:4–5; 31:5; 44:9–15; 48:42–43; 56:5–6. The view may be considered widespread; see Wisdom 1:12–16, 2:21–24; Sifre Deuteronomy 323, 339; Genesis Rabbah 9:5, 17:8; BT Shabbat 55a–b; Mekhilta Exodus 14:29.

[77] 2 Baruch 28:5; 31:5; 40:3; 42:7; 44:12; 48:43; 54:17; 74:2; cf. 39:4; 53:7; 83:15; 85:5, 13.

[78] Bogaert 1969, 405; Levison 1988, 139; Henze 2011, 169. See further Dik 2023, 398–405 on 2 Baruch 41:4.

[79] 2 Bar 54:17–19; OTP.

[80] One may identify hints of more collective understandings of sin and judgment. The Northern Kingdom fell because its kings caused the people to sin; yet the Southern Kingdom fell because its people caused the kings to sin (2 Bar 1:3).

thus more frequently resembles that of Uriel in 4 Ezra (cf. 8:56) than it does Ezra's, which is more pessimistic (Stone 1990, 73).

Arguments from natural law further demonstrate how humans reject "the understanding of the Most High" evident within "the artful work of his creation."[81] Such reliance upon natural theology was hardly so explicit within 4 Ezra (Collins 2009, 86–87). Second Baruch, however, exhibits stronger epistemological confidence in what humans can know from the natural order. Likewise, the deity insists that those who came after Moses "knew that they had the Law reproving them and that light in which nothing could err. Also the spheres which testify, and me" (19:3; trans. Gurtner 2009). Through creation and covenant, God has "placed before you life and death" (19:1). The Deuteronomic language of choosing life (Deut 30:19) shares the perspective of Uriel in 4 Ezra (7:127–129) and is uncompromisingly asserted by the deity. Rather than drawing from "the light" of the law, transgressors knowingly drew from "the darkness of Adam" (2 Bar 18:2). Both powers, "light" and "darkness," remain active in the world and accessible to conscious human choice.[82] Second Baruch's approach to hope is, therefore, not so deeply threatened by the implications of anthropological pessimism.[83] The human remains knowledgeable, capable, and responsible.

Intercession

Both apocalypses exhibit the prayers of the righteous as a resilient, hopeful form of human agency in the face of despair. Baruch is told early in the book that his "prayers are like a strong city wall" in the face

Likewise, Adam's transgression provoked the angels to sin (56:10). Even so, 2 Baruch clarifies: "For they possessed freedom in that time in which they were created ... But the rest of the multitude of angels, who have no number, restrained themselves" (56:11, 14; OTP).

[81] 2 Baruch 54:17–18; cf. 19:3, 57:2.

[82] 2 Baruch 48:40; cf. 51:16. On the light/darkness imagery, see Harris 2019, 101–8.

[83] 2 Baruch 48:29; 51:3–10; Murphy 1985, 18.

of Jerusalem's destruction (2 Bar 2:2). Like his counterpart, Baruch explicitly fulfills the role of interceding for his downfallen people (34:1). His major intercessory prayer transpires in multiple stages,[84] as Baruch raises the plight of humanity yet curiously answers his own petition within the process of intercession.[85] Baruch becomes his own "angel," so to speak. David Seal describes how the prayer evokes "feelings of hope and confidence" that "certain elements of the created order remain whole" (2019, 648–49). Reassurance concerning viable human agency becomes an urgent concern within his prayer.

After seven days of fasting (47:2–48:1), Baruch begins with a hymnic prelude that extols the deity's sovereignty over time and the mysteries of the cosmos (48:1–10). He then offers his "petition" for mercy upon the frailty of the human in the face of the deity's eternal powers (48:11–20). The petition employs the familiar intercessory tactic of pleading for mercy upon the weak, now applied specifically to human mortality. Why should the infinite creator remain wrathful toward corruptible humanity? Baruch further applies the intercessory logic specifically to "the nation that you have chosen" (48:20): "Protect us in your compassion, and help us in your mercy. Look upon the little ones that are subject to you ... and do not destroy the hope of our people" (48:18–19; OTP). This plea for divine mercy is as fervent as that of Ezra, yet it concerns mortality rather than sinful nature.

Baruch then didactically answers his own petition for mercy with a dogmatic assertion concerning the redemptive power of the law:

> But I will now speak before you, and I will say as my heart thinks.[86] In you do we trust, for, behold, your Law is with us. And we know that we will not fall as long as we keep your statutes.[87]

[84] 2 Baruch 48:1–10, 11–20, 21–25, 26–41, 42–47. Henze (2020, 204) classifies the passage as "petitionary" prayer.

[85] Wright (2003, 77) observes: "Each of the dialogues ... ends with Baruch acquiescing."

[86] The transitional formula typically reorients Baruch from complaint toward reassurance (cf. 12:1; 48:44; 52:4).

[87] 2 Bar 48:21–22; trans. Gurtner 2009.

His intercession moves by degrees from the deity's surpassing might, to the frailty of mortal humanity, to the redemptive promise of the law within Israel. Embedded within the plaintive intercession is the assurance that the solution is self-evident. God need not grant anything new. The law remains with Israel; the human being is well equipped to understand and observe it. The deity accepts the premises of Baruch's prayer (48:26), then elaborates its eschatological implications. God's judgment will assert its righteous claims in the coming latter-day tribulations: "For each of the inhabitants of the earth knew when he was sinning. But my Law they did not know, because of their pride" (48:40).

Presented with these apocalyptic terrors, Baruch moves to a final round of self-explanatory intercession (48:42–47). He laments, no less than Ezra, the consequences of primordial transgression:

> O Adam, what have you done to all those who are born from you? And what will be said to the first Eve who heeded the serpent. For all this multitude are going to corruption.[88]

Once again, Baruch interprets the consequences of primeval transgression as mortality. His prayer then leads him to discover reassurance for his own plaintive lament:

> But again I will speak in your presence. You, O Lord, my Lord, know what is in your creature. For you did, of old, command the dust to produce Adam, and you know the number of those who have been born from him, and how much they, who have exited and did not confess you as their creator, sinned before you. And concerning all these, their end will convict them. And your Law, which they have transgressed, will repay them on your day.[89]

Baruch's intercession becomes a didactic discourse that contains within itself both complaint and reassurance. There is no intercessory "stalemate" between prophet and deity. The very attempt at intercession only reassures the reliability of the law, the abiding justice of the deity, and the authentic freedom of the human being. The final justice of God will

[88] 2 Bar 48:42–43; trans. Gurtner 2009.

[89] 2 Bar 48:44–47; trans. Gurtner 2009.

thus be fully warranted, as is further revealed to Baruch in the ensuing dialogue on the afterlife (48:48–51:16). Baruch's concluding epistle will explicitly deny the possibilities of intercession at the final judgment in the strongest possible terms (85:12–13), eclipsing even the severity of Uriel's refutation (4 Ezra 7:105).[90] Such certainty rests upon the confidence that human agency retains a fighting chance, even within the present, corruptible age.

Leadership

As Baruch anticipates his coming ascension into the heavenly world,[91] he actively transfers his own inspired leadership to the elders of Israel, who are entrusted with his revelations (2 Bar 31, 44–46; Wright 2003, 91–97). Second Baruch thus requires no esoteric elite to preserve revelation (in contrast to 4 Ezra). The elders of Israel, fulfilling their hereditary vocation to teach the law, are sufficient to sustain the community until the end.[92] When the people despair that the Torah cannot be taught apart from Baruch's prophetic status (46:1–3; cf. 32:8–33:3), he immediately refutes this mistaken assumption: "Israel will not lack a wise man, nor the race of Jacob a son of the Law" (46:4; trans. Gurtner 2009). In his final address, the people yet again lament the passing of authoritative leadership, yet Baruch corrects their despair: "Shepherds and lamps and fountains come from the Law. And though we depart, the Law endures" (77:15–16; trans. Gurtner 2009). The Torah repeatedly

[90] Such vociferous denials of intercession at the final judgment "suggests that the possibility was being canvassed and needed to be denied" (Bauckham 1998, 143; see Trumbower 2001, 31, 53). While 4 Ezra is somewhat more ambiguous, both works mediate away from the possibility of intercession on the last day, narrowing its application to aid the struggling righteous in the present age. Baruch's epistle exhorts the people to "pray diligently, from all your soul," pleading for divine mercy: "For if he does not judge us according to the multitude of his mercies, woe to all of us who are born!" (2 Bar 84:10–11; trans. Gurtner 2009).

[91] 2 Baruch 13:3; 43:2; 46:7; 48:30; 76:2.

[92] Whitters (2003, 64–65, 114–15) demonstrates how Baruch's audience expands to increasingly wider spheres.

generates leaders in every generation. The imagery of the "lamp" of the Torah (18:2) now expresses the persistent instruction that shines perpetually, even in spite of the departure of faithful leaders (cf. 17:4, 59:2).

Nor is there need for an entirely new revelatory writing of the law, as in 4 Ezra (Gore-Jones 2021, 402). The Jewish people, "my people" (2 Bar 44:1), under the leadership of their present elders, will be well prepared in future generations to teach wisdom and Torah without an esoteric elite.[93] The unique, written revelation of 2 Baruch decisively secures this possibility while remaining a vessel that is transparently open to the greater community. This immediacy and openness to the totality of the natural community, rather than a commitment to the preservation of pure knowledge among elites, likewise reflects 2 Baruch's greater confidence in the integrity of the will, the clarity of human understanding, and the hope that all Israel may enter into life by freely keeping the commandments.

Hope, Agency, and Interim Ethics

Contemporary philosophers and social scientists have explored the complex, blended roles that human agency plays in the construction of hope. In the cognitive psychological treatment of C. R. Snyder, hope rests upon "an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (Snyder et al. 2018, 27). By creating agentic pathways, often beyond multiple obstacles, hope connects "the present to [the] imagined future" (Rand and Cheavens 2009, 324). Hope, of course, may invest agency beyond the human being alone. Patrick Shade thus qualifies hope as a "transcendence" that may be "conditioned" or "unconditioned." Hope arises amid practical contingencies of context, inspiring a dynamic "stretching" of human agency beyond its conditioned limitations. Yet hope may persist "even when there is no human or conditioned basis,"[94]

[93] Murphy 1985, 13, 20; Henze 2011, 210, 238.

[94] See also Lazarus 1999, 674: "We can hope even when we are helpless to effect the outcome."

as it relocates agency in an unconditionally transcendent power, such as God (Shade 2001, 179). For Shade, such unconditioned transcendence becomes dangerous when it diverges too radically from a constructive balance with practical, contingent agency.[95]

If ever a literary corpus pressed the boundaries of "unconditioned transcendence," it would be the literary apocalypses of ancient Judaism. The conventional apocalyptic paradigms in which divine agency transcends death through resurrection, purifies the cosmos through new creation, and redeems history through Messianism were long established and remained compelling for the late-first-century authors of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch.[96] Yet in their creative innovation of revealed dialogues, the two works also invest hope in a reconceptualized human agent that can withstand the last days. As Baruch pointedly states the problem: "Who is worthy to live" (2 Bar 41:1) through the impending crisis? As Ezra desperately inquires: "What good is it that an everlasting hope has been promised to us, but we have miserably failed?" (4 Ezra 7:120). While their complex dialogues serve multiple functions, both express the realistic despair that threatens the human agent while reconstructing viable agentic pathways that will allow the righteous to survive, perhaps to flourish, until the final reckoning. They pursue meaningfully different strategies as they construct an interim ethic that meets this urgent demand.[97]

Ezra's journey from the paralysis of anxiety to a mission of prophetic consolation follows a more painstaking pathway of agentic restoration. The work cautiously invests a vigilantly guarded measure of hope in the visionary elite, their humble penitence, intercessory vocation, and newly inspired revelation of the Torah. As exemplified in Ezra, the formidable resistance posed by the "evil heart" demands a more radical transformation from *aporia* to consolation, one in which there remain

[95] Shade 2001, 22, 177–79, 185, 196–97.

[96] Murphy 2012, 13–25; Collins 2016, 13–15.

[97] The present examination could be extended to the Apocalypse of Abraham, whose dialogues also concern the mystery of sin, free will, and righteous agency (14:3; 23:12–14; 26:5). See Orlov 2021, 34–41, 144–54.

legitimate tensions between human understanding and divine justice.[98] Nevertheless, in Ezra's journey the reader may visualize the reconstruction of a human agent who can stand in the last days and inherit eschatological reward.

Baruch's consolatory journey invests more immediate reassurance in human agency and, by extension, the natural Jewish community. Epistemology, volition, and communal agency remain sufficiently reliable that many—and "not a few" (2 Bar 21:11)—may pursue the light of the Torah within the present world. The tensions between human understanding and divine justice are less severe, so much so that Baruch even comes to correct his plaintive laments and intercessions through the process of his own righteous prayers. Hope arises less from radical transformation than from the gradual reassurance that the problems of mortality may be overcome through a human agent well equipped to know and pursue the light of the Torah until the end.

Through their explorations of the turbulent internal universe of the human, the two works thus wage an apocalyptic theodicy whose "unconditioned" hopes intersect, and indeed depend upon, anthropodicy. The vindication of God hinges precariously upon the vindication of the human being.

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[98] For Najman (2014, 24, 128), hope in 4 Ezra becomes "radical in the sense that it transcends the culture's current understanding of its values." This definition of "radical hope" is informed by Jonathan Lear (2006).

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