

ON READING AN APOCALYPSE*

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1. Introductory Matters and Basic Issues

1.1 A decade has passed since the Uppsala symposium which was one of those timely events that have it in them to change, or at least to deflect, the path of scholarship. The Uppsala discussions brought a variety of social and historical factors to bear on the study of apocalypticism, conceived in broader cultural, temporal and geographic terms than just Jewish, just Palestinian, just Second Temple. Other participants in the present Symposium will discuss the impact of that broader chronological and geographical perspective on the study of the Jewish apocalyptic literature.

1.2 I wish to direct my attention however, to one single apocalypse, for I have spent a good many years, indeed far more than have passed since the Uppsala symposium, in the close reading of one particular apocalypse, that is 4 Ezra.¹ The result of those years'

* This paper is substantially unchanged from the form in which it was delivered at the Symposium, "Apocalypticism After the Uppsala Colloquium" at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, in Anaheim, CA, November 19, 1989.

¹This is the name commonly used for chapters 3-14 of the work known in the English Apocrypha as "2 Esdras." These chapters form a single, Jewish work which was written about 95 C.E. originally in Hebrew. Issues of original language, text,

reading is an overall interpretation of 4 Ezra which is new in its emphasis and its general thrust. Here I shall attempt to set forth basic aspects of that new interpretation and to consider whether this approach to 4 Ezra has any ramifications for the understanding of other apocalypses.

1.3 At the outset, two preliminary observations are in order. First, what I am presenting to you is hindsight. Here I shall set forth what I did in normative terms, yet I did not start analyzing the book after having conceived of the issues in those terms. Instead, I reached my overall interpretation through an extended process of methodologically non-selfconscious agonizing over the meaning of the document. Here I shall extract a systematic description of my approach to the book from the outcome of that agonizing. The second preliminary observation is that this method of interpretation may not prove fruitful for all apocalyptic literature. Of course, that can only be verified by trying to read other apocalypses in a similar way.

1.4 The central issue in previous exegesis of 4 Ezra has been inconsistency. From Richard Kabisch at the end of the 19th century down to the recent work of Egon Brandenburger,² scholars have endeavored to understand how the varied literary features of the book are

transmission, etc. are dealt with in detail in the writer's forthcoming 4 Ezra (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

² For a review of scholarship, see 4 Ezra Commentary, "Introduction," Section 3. See R. Kabisch, Das vierte Buch Esra auf seine Quellen untersucht (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1889) and E. Brandenburger, Die Verborgenheit Gottes im Weltgeschehen (ATANT, 68; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981).

Stone, ON READING AN APOCALYPSE related to one another and how the apparently “contradictory” things that the book says could co-exist in the same work. Other, specific issues have been of concern as well, as exemplified by the recent flurry of writing on theodicy and the responsibility for evil,³ but it is these inconsistencies have been the gadfly to scholarly concern.

1.5 In my view, however, not strict logical consistency but coherency is a controlling category which must guide us in understanding the book. The book made sense to its author, to its readers: our task is to discover how. Concurrently, the book must be regarded as religious literature, not just as a compendium of theological concepts or midrashic traditions, and what it says about the religious experience and social functioning of the pseudepigraphic hero should be taken rather seriously at the social and psychological levels as well as at the literary. From these new methodological sensitivities arises a different way of approaching the delineation of the function of 4 Ezra.

2. The History of Scholarship on these Issues

2.1 The new perspectives in interpretation of the book engendered by this approach stand out most strikingly when regarded in light of past scholarship which, as we stated, concentrated on the question of logical inconsistency. Consequently, I shall outline briefly three different responses to the problem of inconsistency: the literary critical response of

³ A.L. Thompson, Responsibility for Evil in the Theodicy of IV Ezra (SBLDS, 29) Missoula, MO: Scholars Press, 1977. A more recent work on the same topic, which I have not yet seen is: T.W. Willett, Eschatology in the Theodicies of 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra (JSP Supplement Series; Sheffield: University of Sheffield).

Kabisch and Box,⁴ the form- critical and psychological resolution of Hermann Gunkel,⁵ and the formal and theological approach of Egon Brandenburger.⁶

2.2 Children of their age, Kabisch and Box resolved the inconsistencies they perceived in the book by a source critical analysis. They viewed 4 Ezra as a composite of five sources, fairly clumsily put together by a “Redactor.” In theory, it was literary roughnesses and inconsistencies that betrayed the presence of sources, whose existence was confirmed by supposedly incompatible eschatological conceptions. In fact, as the art was practiced by Box, the argument turned chiefly on the issues of conceptual contradictions, with literary criteria playing only a minor role.

2.3 This theory was quickly and tellingly criticized,⁷ and the next major contribution to the understanding of 4 Ezra was made by Hermann Gunkel. He recognized, as have many

⁴ Kabisch, Vierte Buch; G.H. Box, The Ezra-Apocalypse, (London: Pitman, 1912). The history of scholarship is set forth in detail in Stone, 4 Ezra. These were not, of course, the only scholars holding this view, but they are typically representative. The same is true of those authorities cited in the rest of this paragraph.

⁵ H. Gunkel, "Das vierte Buch Esra," Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des alten Testaments, ed. E. Kautzsch (Tübingen: Mohr, 1900) 2: 331-402.

⁶ Brandenburger, Verborgtheit. This was not his first work relevant to the topic, nor is he the only scholar taking this approach: see further below. His is the most recent, major exposition of it, however, and we have consequently chosen to concentrate our attention on it.

⁷ See, e.g., the “Prefatory Note” by W. Sanday in Box, Ezra-Apocalypse.

who followed, that some of the phenomena Kabisch and Box had observed really did exist in the book, in particular the distinction between the first four and the last three Visions. Yet he denied that these phenomena imposed a source theory. His own view was founded upon three arguments: (a) that a more careful reading shows that many of the supposed “inconsistencies” did not exist; (b) that some of the inconsistencies were caused by the inclusion of oral, traditional materials into the apocalypse, particularly in its eschatology; and (c) that the author’s deep and complex nature engendered thought that is not always consistent.⁸ “According to Gunkel”— to quote Hayman’s apt observation— “the splitting of the author’s being into the man and the angel ... corresponds with his inner life.”⁹

2.4 The recent works of Wolfgang Harnisch and Egon Brandenburger on 4 Ezra, though differing from one another in many details, are dominated by a common methodological approach.¹⁰ Both scholars regard the book as the work of a single author (although

⁸ Gunkel set his views forth in his introductory comments to his Commentary on 4 Ezra in “Das vierte Buch Esra,” Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des alten Testaments, ed. E. Kautzsch (Tübingen: Mohr, 1900), 2. 331-402.

⁹ Truly to be inconsistent, therefore, ideas must not just be formally inconsistent. The critic seeking inconsistency must take the other factors into account as well.

¹⁰ Thus note Brandenburger’s earlier work, Adam und Christus: Exegetisch-Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Röm 5:21-21 (WMANT, 7; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1962) which influenced Wolfgang Harnisch. Harnisch wrote a series of articles on 4 Ezra, and his most substantial

Harnisch also utilized a modified source theory claiming that Visions 5 and 6 are secondary) and both readily admit that the author used pre-existing sources. Reflecting modern trends in biblical scholarship, they demand quite rightly that the overall interpretation of the book account for its chief literary features and express the author's intent and ideas. Yet in their isolation of "chief literary features" and of "the author's intent and ideas" a deliberate choice may be discerned which reflects their approach and reinforces their argumentation.¹¹ Our discussion is based on the most recent exposition of the Harnisch-Brandenburger approach, the latter's Die Verborgenheit Gottes, published in 1981.

3. The Character of 4 Ezra according to Brandenburger

3.1 4 Ezra, as even a superficial reader knows, is composed of seven parts which are usually called "visions". The first three are actually dialogues between the seer and the angel Uriel; the fifth and the sixth are symbolic dreams and their interpretations. The fourth starts off looking like a dialogue, but shifts to an ecstatic experience of heavenly

contribution is his book Verhängnis und Verheißung der Geschichte. Untersuchungen zum Zeit- und Geschichtsverständnis im 4 Buch Esra und in der syr. Baruch-apokalypse (FRLANT, 97: Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969).

¹¹ Naturally, we all are vulnerable to such circularity. Below I use terms such as "the obvious literary point" or the like; these too beg the question. In the final analysis, only the "fit" between the theory proposed and the givens of the text can serve as a criterion for the reasonableness of a theory.

Jerusalem, while the seventh “vision” tells of the restoration of the Sacred Scriptures, burnt in the destruction of the Temple.

3.2 The central problem of the book was conceived by Brandenburger in terms of conceptual and formal issues. One arises from the disputatious dialogue of the first three visions. The views forwarded by the Angel in Visions 1-3 are those accepted by the Seer in the Abschiedsrede in 14:28-36, while the views urged by the Seer in Visions 1-3 are not taken up at all later in the book.¹²

3.3 Brandenburger’s approach is based upon the notion that the purpose of the book is **to promote the views which are set in the angel’s mouth in Visions 1-3 and in Ezra’s mouth in the Abschiedsrede**. These views were identical with the author’s own and they are opposed to those argued by Ezra in Visions 1-3. Thus Brandenburger and Harnisch discern two clear, polemically opposed opinions in 4 Ezra. Both scholars think that these two views or opinions reflect two, polemically opposed social realities, either distinct groups (Harnisch) or “streams of thought” (Brandenburger).¹³ 4 Ezra, therefore, is before all else a polemic over certain theological issues, and an assertion of those opinions about the theological issues which the author considers to be correct. The actual theological

¹² Another issue is structural: the dialogue breaks off in Vision 4. Furthermore, the relevance of Visions 5-6 to the problematic presented by Visions 1-4 and 7 (as Brandenburger conceived it) must be explained.

¹³ See Stone, 4 Ezra, “Introduction,” part 3.

issues at stake are three: (1) theodicy; (2) the redemptive character of Torah which is unrealizable; and (3) that many are created and only few are saved.

3.4 These issues are lengthily debated, Brandenburger maintains, by the seer and the angel in Visions 1-3, but no change in the seer's position resulted from this debate. In Vision 4, however, the seer undergoes a remarkable transformation; he comforts the mourning woman using the very arguments with which the angel, unsuccessfully, attempted previously to console him. This transformation is designed to resolve a problem in the narrative plot. Visions 5-6 are to be revelations to Ezra, yet in the course Visions 1-3 Ezra was not moved from his skeptical views by the discussion. Consequently, he can be made worthy of receipt of the revelation to come is only by a wondrous transformation which is consequently introduced. So Brandenburger! Observe that, although Brandenburger notes that this transformation took place and describes some of its features, he does not seek explain it. Indeed, he is not concerned with the dynamic of the transformation itself and he energetically denies the relevance of the psychological factors such as were invoked by Gunkel. Because he regards the purpose of the book to be the presentation of a certain point of view, it suffices him to regard the transformation as a technical literary strategy.

3.5 The chief structural issues correlative with this basic exegetical position are, then: first, the nature and function of the dialogue in the book; second, the role of Vision 4 and Ezra's transformation; third, the relationship of Visions 5-6 to the rest of the book; and finally, the purpose and function of Vision 7. On another level, there is a problem of the

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relationship between the personae of Ezra and the angel. Thanks to Gunkel and
Brandenburger these issues are to the fore, but Brandenburger has not resolved them.¹⁴

3.6 In response a number of observations may be made. First, it seems to us patently
against the literary truth of the book to maintain that the agonizing dialogues of Visions
1-3 are simply a literary means of forwarding the author's views, which are put in the
angel's mouth. Ezra, not the angel, is the dominant "I" of the first part of the book.
Second, Brandenburger regards the book as a carefully crafted theological treatise, yet in
it no answer is given, on theological or other grounds, to the difficult issues posed by the
seer in Visions 1-3. This tells profoundly against Brandenburger's basic attitude to the
book. Third, he ignores all but the testamentary section in Vision 7. This runs against the
obvious thrust of the vision which focuses on the idea of revelation to Ezra like to
Moses.¹⁵ Fourth, the relevance of Visions 5-6 to the basic thrust of the book, as conceived
of it, is unclear. Finally, he can offer no explanation of the transformation of Ezra in
Vision 4, just the assertion that it is required by the author on literary grounds.

4. The Criterion of Logical Consistency

4.1 The problematic issues that Brandenburger's theory attempts to resolve may be
described as a series of inconsistencies. Some of these inconsistencies are literary and

¹⁴ Necessarily, the above outline of Brandenburger's views is sketchy, yet we must
make one or two observations on them.

¹⁵ Even on grounds of the number of verses, the Farewell Address is far from being a
major theme of the chapter as a simple verse-count will show.

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structural and they have been discussed above. Others are conceptual and theological. When logical consistency between theological concepts becomes the operative analytical criterion, it produces all sorts of problems. An example is the following. Brandenburger assumed that the purpose of the book was to forward certain points of view and so in the discussion in the first visions he had to isolate just where those points of view were presented. Thus, he made much of the fact that in those visions certain ideas are set in the angel's mouth. These must be the theological ideas which the author wishes to forward since he would scarcely have attributed to the angel or to God ideas he considered wrong. Those wrong ideas, which according to Brandenburger the author wishes to controvert, are set in Ezra's mouth.

4.2 Ezra, Brandenburger claims, was unchanging throughout the first three visions.¹⁶ Yet the angel's views in Visions 1-3 are taken up by Ezra in the Abschiedsrede in Vision 7. That implies the transformation in Ezra which is related in Vision 4. Brandenburger regards this transformation as a mere literary strategy, for Ezra must be said to change so as to be worthy of speaking the divine view. Suddenly he changes; all Brandenburger can

¹⁶ This was, in fact, not the case, as we demonstrated in M.E. Stone, "The Way of the Most High and the Injustice of God in 4 Ezra," Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World, ed. R. van den Broek, T. Baarda and J. Mansfeld. (Leiden: Brill, 1988) 132-142.

do is call it a Mysterium.¹⁷ But, we would maintain, the transformation is not thereby explained.

4.3 Moreover, if the views put in the mouth of God or His angel can only be good, why is Ezra chosen to voice wrong opinions? Ezra, we are told, represents the skeptical, even gnosticizing opponents of the author. Yet Ezra is scarcely an appropriate figure for this. To this obvious initial problem we may add another. Brandenburger, and Harnisch before him, had to regard not Ezra, but the angel as the “myself” of the author in the first three Visions of the book. Yet this contradicts the obvious literary sense of those three Visions in which it is Ezra, not the angel, who is the hero. Can the dispute between Ezra and the angel then be adequately explained as a literary representation of a theological Auseinandersetzung which is anchored in social reality? Do Ezra and the angel really represent different points of view having different social bases? Has not a demand for logical consistency led to absurd results? Why? We would deny Brandenburger’s interpretation for the following reasons.

(1) First, the transformation as Brandenburger presents it makes no sense. It is a deus ex machina which is in no way explained by his own assumptions about the book. (2) The view that the angel is the dramatis persona with whom the author identifies in the first four vision runs against literary commonsense. (3) If the point of the book is to forward certain theological concepts, then it is quite extraordinary that Ezra’s theological counter-arguments are never refuted. All that happens in the unexplained Verwandlung. I suggest

¹⁷ Brandenburger, Verborgenheit, 87.

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that although Brandenburger perceived real issues in the study of the book, his analysis does not resolve them because it is based on wrong assumptions. What sort of alternatives can I offer?¹⁸

5. A Search for Coherence

5.1 A significant option is to review the assumptions made about the book. 4 Ezra is clearly the work of a single, consummate literary craftsman. All explanations must start from this fact. Obviously, from Brandenburger's careful but ultimately unsuccessful analysis, 4 Ezra does not make sense as a document presenting a theological argument. However, since it was written by one author, carefully and deliberately, then it may be assumed to have made sense both to its author and to his readers. How so?

5.2 At one level, we may say that most previous critics tried to make sense of the book on the basis of the assumption that the propositions asserted expressly or implicitly by the author are (or should be) consistent with one another as to their content. Where such logical consistency does not appear on the face of asserted or implied propositions, it was

¹⁸ Brandenburger's book appeared in 1981. At that time I was in the process of working out crucial parts my own approach to the 4 Ezra and, having heard something of Brandenburger's work, I resolved to postpone reading it until I finished my own analysis. Once the draft of my work was completed, I read Brandenburger's book attentively and integrated it into the results of my own analysis. My major results, however, were reached in engagement with 4 Ezra not with Brandenburger. I am indebted to K. W. Whitney, in discussion with whom I came to see more clearly how this following part of the present paper should be structured.

sought by taking resort either to source critical dissection or to structural hypotheses that run against common sense.

5.3 Yet already Gunkel, by using psychological criteria, had taken the important step of seeking factors other than articulated or implied propositions of the text to give coherence to the work. This possibility should not surprise us, after all. Humans have produced many writings the coherency of which is provided by factors outside the explicit or implied content of their propositions. Indeed, one might maintain with some plausibility that the purpose of 4 Ezra is not to provide a consistent presentation of a series of propositions at all. In other terms: At our point of departure stands the assumption that 4 Ezra made sense to its author and readers. If the book does not make sense as a presentation of a theological argument, then it is not one, but something else!¹⁹

6. Religious Experience

6.1 Here, a second factor in our reading of this apocalypse comes to bear. In our commentary, we have demonstrated quite unambiguously that the religious experience attributed to the pseudonymous seer reflects actual religious experience that the author underwent or of which he knew intimately.²⁰ This may be true of many of the other

¹⁹ As Earle Breech said, it is not “a container for ideas,”: see E. Breech, “These Fragments Have I Shored Against My Ruins: The Form and Function of 4 Ezra,” *JBL* 92(1973), 269.

²⁰ See Stone, *Commentary on 4 Ezra*, 000. We had already foreshadowed this view in 1974 in M.E. Stone, “Apocalyptic, Vision or Hallucination?,” *Milla wa-Milla* 14(1974), 47-56.

Jewish apocalypses of the Second Temple period, although it cannot always be proved as convincingly as in the case of 4 Ezra. This fact has far-reaching implications for the understanding of the book. It makes an enormous difference whether the book is a composition designed to forward certain theological ideas within a literary framework of revelation, or whether the book reflects the author's religious experiences, mediated to us, of course, in a traditionally fixed form. In the latter case, then the author's own experience will be one of the factors providing coherence to the discourse of the book.

6.2 When Hermann Gunkel introduced the issue of the author's psychology into the discussion of 4 Ezra, he proposed that many of the apparent repetitions in the course of the first three visions actually arose from the the author's internal conflicts. The use of a psychological explanation of literary phenomena was energetically rejected by Brandenburger, though he does not clearly say why. We assume that he objects to this approach so strongly because it involves shifting the emphasis of the book from the theological discourse to the psychological dynamic.

6.3 As has been noted, the resolution of four central problems in the book will go far towards determining its basic thrust and here we maintain that the author's own religious experience provides one of the central keys to the reading of the book and a resolution of these problems.

6.4 The partners in the dialogues are Ezra and the angel. In Visions 1-3 Ezra is obviously the hero, yet equally obviously the views put by the angel / God cannot have been opposed by the author. We suggest that Ezra and the angel represent two aspects of the author's own internal debate and agonizing over the destruction. In Visions 1-3 his pain

and distress are represented by Ezra; the answers he knows intellectually are represented by the angel.²¹

6.5 The eschatological information imparted by the angel in the course of the first three visions did not differ in its conceptual content from the information revealed by means of the Dream Visions 5 and 6. Yet in Visions 1-3 that information did not satisfy or assuage Ezra's pain, while in Visions 5-6 it certainly did.²² Why? What happened? Ezra was not vanquished by the angel's arguments: Brandenburger realized this! Ezra changed radically, but that change is not a literary device designed to create a purified Ezra, worthy of receipt of revelation, it is a real religious change, an experience of religious conversion undergone by the author.

6.6 A major feature of Vision 4 is role reversal. At the start of the experience, the mourning woman plays the role that Ezra did in Visions 1-3, to which Ezra responds the way the angel did in those Visions.²³ This dynamic precipitated a very powerful religious experience in the course of which the seer received enlightenment and fell unconscious.

²¹ This point is, of course, a development of Gunkel's view.

²² Witness the end of Vision 6 which is a deliberate reversal of the plaint against God's government of the world with which Vision 1 opens.

²³ He can do this, we would maintain, because in fact his position had been changing, albeit very gradually, in the course of the first three visions. In this matter, too, our view differs from that of Brandenburger; it is set forth in "Way of the Most High" and in full detail in the forthcoming 4 Ezra.

This experience was one of religious conversion. In it, the values and ideas that had previously been externalized in the figure of the angel were internalized by the seer, while his pain was now outside him, seen as the woman, and she is wondrously transmuted into the Heavenly Jerusalem! The theological arguments are never resolved theologically, because they are resolved by the conversion itself. In conversion, doubts and inner struggles become irrelevant. For this reason, the next element in the book is revelatory dream vision and not theological refutation. The angel and Ezra are both positive figures, both part of the author's psyche, of the author's self. So is the woman-Jerusalem. When the author is able to externalize the pain as the woman, and to offer comfort in the person of the seer, that catalyzes the powerful psychological experience. Here is the explanation of the "mysterious" change; here is the explanation of the incoherent dialogue; here is the explanation for the inconclusiveness of the theological debate!

6.7 The arguments by which I support this central assertion are complex, and I certainly cannot enter into them now. Moreover, I am not maintaining that an identical psychological dynamic must necessarily be at play in any other work. I do claim, however, that 4 Ezra is a good example of a case where a factor outside the theological or propositional consistency of the statements provides a potent key to the understanding of the book. This is religious literature, it consistently describes religious experience, and the mere possibility that that religious experience has an authentic foundation profoundly affects its interpretation.

7. Social Setting

7.1 A third factor which must be taken into account is the sociological context. Admittedly, it is most difficult, to investigate the sociological context/s of the apocalypses in light of ordinary historical sources.²⁴ We know almost nothing about the circles that wrote them, or their actual historical identification; we are ignorant of how the apocalypses functioned and were used. This is due to lack of information in conventional historical sources, aggravated by the pseudepigraphic mode of writing.

7.2 Nonetheless, an approach analogous to that developed in the case of the psychological experience of the apocalyptic author may cast some light on the social role and functioning of the seer. Our point of departure is the various passages in which describe the relationship between the seer and the surrounding society. For instance, in 12:42 Ezra is recognized as a prophet by the people, by the social context, and that he assents to that role by not denying the people's recognition. The people address Ezra as a "prophet," and Ezra accepts that title: it is the people's attitude to him that determines his acceptance. From a methodological point of view, the fact that the social context is presented as determinative of religious role is a factor that has never been taken into account in the

²⁴ M.E. Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period, ed. M.E. Stone (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2.2; Assen and Philadelphia: van Gorcum and Fortress, 1984), 433-4; M.E. Stone, "The Question of the Messiah in 4 Ezra," Judaism and its Messiahs, ed. J. Neusner and et alii (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 217-220.

Stone, ON READING AN APOCALYPSE study of the apocalypses. It is, moreover, significant for the exegesis of the book that this only happens in Vision 5, and not before. Henceforth Ezra conducts himself as a prophet.

7.3 Vision 7 is a narrative about a revelatory experience and its central function is to declare Ezra revealer of the twenty-four books of Sacred Scripture as well as of esoteric teachings. Thus Ezra is assimilated to Moses, he is a perfect revelatory figure, and he is assumed to heaven. The vision opens by drawing the parallel between Ezra and Moses. While to Moses were revealed both exoteric and esoteric things (14:6), in 14:7 Ezra is told that he has had esoteric revelation that he is to teach this secretly to the wise, and that he is to be assumed. He is to go to instruct the wise (the recipients of the esoteric teaching) and comfort the lowly among the people. Ezra agrees to this but demands exoteric revelation as well as esoteric, for “thy law has been burned.” God instructs Ezra to take five men with him and to go to a field. (Note that a group of five men accompany the seer also in 2 Apocalypse of Baruch). Following the divine command, he assembles the people and addresses them. Then he departs for the field, receives the cup of the holy spirit, drinks it and dictates his words. He wrote esoteric and exoteric works, the whole of scripture and an additional seventy books.²⁵

7.4 So there are three dramatis personae: Ezra, the group of five scribes, and the people. To the people Ezra speaks in general terms, urging righteousness and hope (it is this

²⁵Compare also the three actors: Jesus, the inner group, and the people in Mark 4, cf. particularly Mark 4:33-34. This is one a a number of examples from the Gospels.

Stone, ON READING AN APOCALYPSE speech that Brandenburger sees as the very climax of Vision 7). While in the field, he dictates secret and open teachings to the scribes. It has been observed that in Chapter 6 of Ascension of Isaiah, there is an interesting description of ecstatic activity. Isaiah is in the presence of the king and the princes of Israel. A group of 40 prophets is also present and the king summoned all the people. Isaiah spoke praises of God and entered a trance in which his spirit was assumed. The three groups are maintained. Isaiah was in the circle of the prophets, who knew he was in trance. The people were apart and did not know. They had been sent out of the room when he went into the trance. On his awakening, he recounted his experience to Hezekiah and his son and to the prophets, but not to the people.

7.5 It is intriguing to compare this scenario with that in 4 Ezra and 2 Apocalypse of Baruch. They may be seen as sharing the three players:

the seer, recognized as prophet by the people or the king;

an inner group which accompanies the seer and is to some extent privy to his ecstatic experience; and

the people.

There is a separation of place: the people are apart, and the seer and his inner group are apart.²⁶ This is true both in 4 Ezra and in Ascension of Isaiah. There is also, at least in Ascension of Isaiah and in 4 Ezra, a distinction between two parts of the seer's experience

²⁶ The initial impetus for this approach was given to me by A. Roitman in a discussion. The development of the material is my own responsibility.

Stone, ON READING AN APOCALYPSE and communication, that to the people as a whole, and that to the inner circle. In 2 Apocalypse of Baruch at a number of points the seer secludes himself with an inner group of five, while the people await their return.

7.6 We propose considering the possibility that these features reflect aspects of the actual social functioning of the author. The public recognition of Ezra's role as prophet and his responsive acceptance of it may well correspond to the way that the apocalyptic author himself was recognized by his own society (however small that society might have been). The threefold division of people, inner group and seer has many parallels and cannot be viewed as independent inventions by the authors of these three ancient texts. In fact, the seer was surrounded by an inner group to whom he revealed the esoteric teaching and who participated in some measure in ecstatic experience. At a greater distance was the general society from which the writer/prophet received validation and which he addressed in prophetic style. These considerations become potent factors in the exegesis of the book, as well as in providing insight into the actual functioning of apocalyptic writers.

²⁷7.8 We may perhaps be permitted one further piece of speculation. In the narrative of the book, Ezra receives his prophetic role from the people. To the people, however, he does not reveal the secret knowledge that has been made available to him: that he uncovers only to the elect, inner group. This may reflect a reality in the author's society, i.e. the author may have received his own authentication through social recognition and

²⁷ It may also provide something of a key to the understanding of pseudepigraphy, and particularly the author's self-understanding.

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consequently have acted in accordance with fixed, commonly recognized patterns, including two different contexts of revelation. If this was so, then it offers some insight into the functioning of 4 Ezra. The book's message may have been effective in society because it presents the seer as acting in the way that the author's contemporaries readily recognized as appropriate to prophets and apocalyptic visionaries. The author's personal experience, then, is mediated in a traditional form, and his message gains effectiveness because the pseudepigraphical seer is described as conducting himself in clearly identifiable ways that carry authority.

8. Concluding Remarks

8.1 In conclusion, then, when we consider what has been presented here, and try to draw more general conclusions from it, the following points may be of broader application.

- a. The category of coherency must be introduced into the discussion and the search after the factors providing coherency should be a central concern of those studying this ancient religious literature. This is true, of course, in cases of unitary authorship (or powerful unitary redaction).
- b. The apocalypses must be taken much more seriously as religious literature, not just as compendia of theological concepts or midrashic traditions. These are works to be examined in their own right.
- c. Therefore, what the books say about the functioning of their pseudepigraphic heroes should play a significant role in the exegesis and explanation of the books. This is true at various levels of discourse, both social and psychological, as well as conceptual.

