

## The City in 4 Ezra

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### *I The Problem*

In 4 Ezra's fourth vision and its interpretation, the visionary sees a mourning woman who is transformed into "an established city, and a place of huge foundations" (10:27). The city is Zion (10:44). Because Ezra mourned Zion sincerely, the angel says, "the Most High ... has shown you the brilliance of her glory, and the loveliness of her beauty" (10:50). The city that Ezra has seen is the city of the Most High, glorious and beautiful, and not just the earthly Jerusalem. This is clear since the angel told Ezra to go to an unbuilt field "for no work of man's building could endure in a place where the city of the Most High was to be revealed" (10:54).

Next, in 4 Ezra 10:55-56 the angel commands Ezra to enter the wondrous city, into which the mourning woman has changed. He is to hear and see as much as he, a human being, can see and hear. He is granted this experience because he "has been named before the Most High, as but few have been" (10:57). This command is the end of the incident and its fulfillment is not related.

The thesis of this paper is that in this passage the heavenly city is a metaphor for the environs of God. In this respect, it functions like the metaphors of the heavenly Temple and the Chariot in *1 Enoch* and in the Hechalot books. The distinctive formulation of the commandment in 4 Ezra clearly indicates that entry into the city means experience of the Divine. Ezra can only experience the divine in partial, human measure.

This command indicates that Ezra has achieved a new level of revelation, the experience of the Divine presence.

The author of 4 Ezra is ambiguous about the revelation of heavenly secrets, as can be shown from other places in the book (4:4-11, 4:20, 5:38-39, etc.). He certainly does not regard them as information to be made known to ordinary people (see 8:61). His reticence is not, however, a denial of the mystic apprehension of God or of heavenly mysteries, but reflects an unwillingness to speak of them except in allusive language. Such an attitude can be observed in other Jewish works of the period.

*II The Passage 10:51-56 and its Meaning*

**10:51** Therefore I told you to remain in the field where no house had been built, **52** for I knew that the Most High would reveal all these things to you.

**53** Therefore I told you to go into the place where there was no foundation of any building, **54** for no work of man's building could endure in a place where the city of the Most High was to be revealed.

**55** Therefore do not be afraid and do not let your heart be terrified; but go in and see the splendour and vastness of the building, as far as it is possible for your eyes to see it, **56** and afterwards you will hear as much as your ears can hear.

**57** For you are more blessed than many, and you have been named before the Most High, as but few have been.<sup>1</sup>

This passage, at the end of the fourth vision of 4 Ezra, is followed by the angel's injunctions to Ezra, which form the bridge to the next, fifth vision (10:58-60).

Several points mark the cited passage as worthy of attention. They are the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Michael E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra. A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) is the source of all English language quotations of the text of 4 Ezra. 4 Ezra is a Jewish apocalyptic work written in the last decade of the first century C.E. in Hebrew, though it has survived only in a bevy of secondary translations. The arguments to support this position are given in Stone, *Fourth Ezra*.

Stone, City in 4 Ezra, p. 3

- a. The apparent doublet of 10:51-52 and 10:53-54. Each section of the cited passage is marked by the word "Therefore," but these first two sections also repeat the same information.
- b. The preceding angelic interpretation of the vision is completed by 10:51-52 and every element of the vision has been interpreted by the end of 10:52. A codicil is added comprising the repetition in 10:53-4 and then a new commandment in 10:55-56, with a conclusion in 10:57.
- c. This additional commandment is given but its fulfillment is not related.

### *III The Proposed Solution*

The present article is not the first time that the doublet, 10:51-52 and 10:53-55, has been noticed. In 1912, G.H. Box remarked: "It is obvious that vv. 53-54 repeat the substance of vv. 51-52 in an otiose manner. The two pairs of verses are clearly doublets, of which vv. 53-54 seem to be the more original." This doublet, he concludes, "clearly existed in the Greek text."<sup>2</sup> He offers no reason for the doublet to have arisen, any more than the present writer could in his commentary on 4 Ezra, published in 1990.<sup>3</sup> It was remarked that 10:53-4 make explicit mention of the foundations of the city, which are also mentioned in 10:27. These foundations are mentioned also in Revelation 21:14 and 19 as well as Hebrews 11:10.<sup>4</sup> It is significant, moreover, that in a list of things that mark

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<sup>2</sup> G.H. Box, *The Ezra-Apocalypse* (London: Pitman, 1912), 241.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 338-39.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 327. In a number of instances in the Hebrew Bible the foundations of the city or the temple are mentioned, usually talking of its utter destruction or its complete rebuilding.

Stone, City in 4 Ezra, p. 4

the earliest stages of creation in 4 Ezra 6:2, we read: "and before the foundations of the garden were laid."<sup>5</sup>

The most interesting part of the codicil is the angelic commandment in 10:55-6. This consists of two parts. In 10:55a the angel reassures Ezra, encouraging him not to fear the extraordinary vision he has received. This is not unusual and such angelic encouragement occurs elsewhere in 4 Ezra and in other vision descriptions in the Bible and the Pseudepigrapha.<sup>6</sup> The command itself ensues, in verses 10:55b-56.

**55** Therefore do not be afraid and do not let your heart be terrified; but go in and see the splendour and vastness of the building, as far as it is possible for your eyes to see it, **56** and afterwards you will hear as much as your ears can hear.

As a result of entering the building, which is the city,<sup>7</sup> Ezra will receive a visual and aural revelation of matters that cannot be fully comprehended by his eyes and ears. In 10:57 the angel gives the reason for this commandment and the gift of revelation that accompanies it: Ezra is more blessed than many and has been named before the Most High.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> In 6:15 the "foundations of the earth" are mentioned, this being an expression found frequently in the Hebrew Bible. Compare "foundations of the world" (2 Sam 22:16 || Ps 18:15), "foundations of the earth" (Job 38:4; Ps 102:25, 104:5; Prov 8:29; Isa 24:18, 40:21, etc.). They often occur in cosmological contexts, as is natural.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Daniel 8:15-18, 10:8-10; Revelation 1:12-17; *1 Enoch* 14:24; 4 Ezra 5:14, 7:2, 10:29, etc. See the discussion in D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 165-66. On *1 Enoch* 14:24, see G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch Chapters 1-36; 81-108* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 270 where some further analysis is to be found.

<sup>7</sup> See 10:42 and Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 129-30 and 327.

<sup>8</sup> See Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 341, commentary on 10:57 where the significance of these statements of Ezra's election is set forth in some detail.

revelation beyond full human comprehension is then an expression of God's love of Ezra, a gift granted to him.<sup>9</sup>

*Prima facie*, one would expect such a command to be followed by a description of the seer's entering the city and what he saw there. However, nothing of the sort occurs. Instead, the text continues with the instructions that prepare the way for the next vision. This seems to leave the commandment incident incomplete, unless the expression "as far as it is possible for your eyes to see it, and afterwards you will hear as much as your ears can hear" is in fact the completion of the incident.

Interestingly, the visionary dimension of this promised revelation precedes the auditory. Ezra will see wondrous things and "afterwards" he will hear, presumably receive, an auditory revelation. This structure of revelation is typical of ascent visions, one of the oldest of which is *1 Enoch* 14 where the visual revelation (*1 Enoch* 14:8-24) precedes the auditory one (*1 Enoch* 14:21-16:4). This sequence is both obvious and widespread, since the narrative of many apocalyptic visions first relates that seen in the ascent. Then the seer asks about what he sees and receives an auditory revelation as a response.

The special nature of the revelation is hinted by the phrases "see as far as it is possible" for you to see and "hear as much as your ears can hear." The seer, entering the city, will encounter such wonders that his eye cannot take them all in and hear such mysteries that his ear cannot comprehend them all. In other words, the wondrous city is the locus of super-human revelation. Were it merely the question of seeing, we would be able to account for the experience described by comparing it with the revelation of the

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<sup>9</sup> It is possible to interpret this statement as referring, not to the immediately preceding verses, but to the

ideal temple city in Ezekiel 40-48. Intriguingly contrasting with 4 Ezra, at the inception of that revelation the "man" who holds the measuring tools says to the prophet: "The man said to me, 'Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel' " (Ezekiel 40:4).<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel is expected to assimilate everything that he is shown and to transmit it. An analogous text is the Aramaic "New Jerusalem," extant in a number of copies at Qumran.<sup>11</sup> The measurements and parts of the heavenly temple/city were a subject of speculation already from ancient times.<sup>12</sup> What

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whole of Vision 4 of 4 Ezra.

<sup>10</sup> When Ezekiel reaches the Holy of Holies, he received an auditory revelation from God, whose glory he has seen returning to the temple (Ezekiel 43:1-9). That revelation is of rules relating to the temple and cult, partly structured as prophetic rebuke.

<sup>11</sup>4Q554-5; 5Q15; 1Q32; 2Q24; 11Q18 Hebrew; 4Q232. See M.E. Stone, "Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature," *Magnalia Dei*, ed. W. Lemke and P.D. Miller F.M. Cross (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 414-54, especially 445-446 (=M.E. Stone, *Selected Studies in the Pseudepigrapha with Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition* [Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha 9; Leiden: Brill, 1991], 379-418, especially 410-11). See further in the next note.

<sup>12</sup> See 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), 385. See also Zechariah 2:1-5 and compare the remarks of Yechezkel Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel from Antiquity to the End of the Second Temple* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1956), vol. 8, 236-237 (in Hebrew). The heavenly temple and its role in the development of later speculation about the celestial realm were discussed in detail by J. Maier, *Vom Kultus zur Gnosis* (Kairos. Wissenschaftliche Studien, 1; Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1964). He does not deal, however, with the role of the heavenly temple in this development. Revelation 21:10-21 draws on and develops the tradition of measurement, while in 21:22-23 the city's temple is "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." The city descends from heaven and has the glory of God (21:10-11). This set of identifications upgrades the temple, which is not identified with the city but with God. God is the temple of the city, so God dwells at Jerusalem's heart.

Ezra is told is rather different; he will be shown not the measurements and parts of the heavenly city, but a revelation that is beyond his human ability fully to understand.

This understanding of the passage is reinforced by the formulation of 10:55-56. A citation occurs in 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 which is attributed to an Apocalypse of Elijah.<sup>13</sup> This reads, "But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him!'" At least the first part of the phrase most probably derived from the Elijah work and it is cited in Rabbinic literature as well. It resembles Isaiah 64:4 with which patristic texts often link it.

4 Ezra 10:55-56 states that the seer's eye will not be able to see nor his ear to hear those things that will be revealed to him in the city. In other words, the knowledge that he will receive will be beyond human ken, so he is to accept as much of it as he can, but he cannot comprehend it all. To express this, the author uses a phraseology that is close to that of the Elijah quotation in 1 Corinthians, but sets it at a different point of time. In 1 Corinthians the point is the hiddenness of the eschatological good in the past, yet the promise of its appearance in the future. To what is 4 Ezra referring? The seer has already received a complete revelation of the meaning of the vision, and with it the promise of redemption. Now he is told that he will receive in the close future a visionary and

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<sup>13</sup> This citation is traced in a plethora of sources in M.E. Stone and J. Strugnell, *The Books of Elijah, Parts 1 and 2* (Texts and Translations Pseudepigrapha Series 8; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 41-73. Some further references are given in Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 341 n. 2. We take this occasion to add the following to the references given there: *History of the Sibyl, Daughter of Heraclius of Ephesus* in a reconstituted Garshuni manuscript, Vatican 15 (J. -M. Sauget, "Reconstitution d'un manuscrit double etc.," *Accademia Lincei, Scienze Morali* Series 8, Volume 19 [1976], 398) citing Corinthians. Three citations by Didymus the Blind are included in Excursus II in the edition of his commentary on Ecclesiastes IV (B. Kramer, *Didymus der Blinde: Kommentar zum Ecclesiastes IV* (Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlung 16; Bonn,

auditory revelation that extends beyond human compass. We propose that this refers to the apprehension of the Divine.

*IV Esoteric Knowledge in 4 Ezra*

This short passage, then, draws on an unusual tradition of revealed knowledge of God in which the metaphor used for the heavenly realm is the city. This an alternative metaphor for describing the surroundings of the Deity's throne, usually spoken of as *Hechalot* or the heavenly temples. It is well known that in Second Temple Jewish texts the imagery of the heavenly temple serves to describe the heavens in the centre of which the Deity sits.<sup>14</sup> Later, in another variation on this theme, Paradise is often presented with characteristics of a city, in both iconography and texts. Likewise, in Revelation 21, as we noted, the heavenly city that will descend is the place where the Deity dwells. The angel commands Ezra to enter the city, using this language which is pregnant with meaning. Yet, the author does not describe Ezra's entry into the city nor what he saw and heard there. This combination identifications with the pregnant language of the angelic command and the absence of any narrative of the execution of the command, highlights 4 Ezra's ambiguous attitude to esoteric knowledge. He is familiar with it, he considers it part of revealed information, but he is loth to be explicit about its actual contents.

In a number of places, 4 Ezra states that humans can only comprehend earthly knowledge, not heavenly. So, in 4:21, "those who dwell upon the earth can understand

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1972) and one on p. 418, l. 16 of his Genesis commentary (*Sur la Genèse*, [Paris Editions du Cerf, Sources chrétiennes 244; Paris, 1976]). A variant form of the citation occurs in Agathangelos §76, end.

<sup>14</sup> See *I Enoch* 71:5-6 and earlier in 14:10-23. See G. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*; rev. edn (New York: Schocken, 1954), 46-52. The literature is extensive and cannot be rehearsed here.

only what is on the earth."<sup>15</sup> In 4 Ezra, this limitation is made explicit particularly as it relates to knowledge of the future, and is expressed quite unambiguously.<sup>16</sup> "He (the author) does not deny the existence of such types of knowledge, but he denies their availability to ordinary men and women."<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, in the book there are a number of references to the revelation of knowledge transcending the earthly and the human, but chiefly relating to God's conduct of the world and theodicy.

At a number of points 4 Ezra admits that knowledge is available that transcends the mundane. Moreover, the formulation of 10:55-56 includes phrases hinting at a revelation inside the heavenly Jerusalem that surpasses human capabilities of sight and hearing. So, Ezra who is proclaimed elect, will experience that which is inexpressible. It seems to us, therefore, that here is a hint at or a reference to the revelation of the Divinity, and that this revelation will take place in the city, which is itself a metaphor for the celestial realm.

In another paper, we showed that 4 Ezra uses an otherwise unattested allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs, a text central to Jewish mystical speculation.<sup>18</sup> In the present paper, we have proposed that he may have used a different metaphor than that usually found for the environs of the divine throne. The book also exhibits an ambiguous attitude to esoteric knowledge. Do these different perspectives indicate that, along with the apocalyptic revelatory tradition that 4 Ezra so obviously represents, the author was also familiar with a tradition of esoteric or mystical knowledge, cultivated in the circles

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<sup>15</sup> Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 87-88.

<sup>16</sup> Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 135 and references there, 341-42.

<sup>17</sup> Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 139.

<sup>18</sup> M.E. Stone, "The Interpretation of Song of Songs in 4 Ezra," *JSJ* (in press).

Stone, City in 4 Ezra, p. 10

from which he came but rarely surfaces in his text? Does this late first-century work exemplify two different types of revealed knowledge current in apocalyptic circles at the time?