

First appearance
of Scholem's
death 1983

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The title of this lecture may seem a little strange, and perhaps it is to be regarded in the same light as the comment of those theorists of communication who observe that the absence of response is itself a response. So the absence of any obvious relationship between 4 Ezra and the Hechalot literature can teach us something about both.

It was Scholem who first showed clearly the terminological connections between certain of the apocalypses and the Hechalot books. These connections related to the description of the upper world. They were strengthened with the publication of Serekh Shirot from Qumran and received a new perspective after Milik's edition of the Enoch manuscripts saw light. Scholem's pioneering work on this aspect of early Jewish mysticism was taken up and developed by others, notably Gruenwald and Halperin.

These studies served not merely to highlight terminological connections. They had certain very important implications, particularly when the early, even possibly fourth century BCE date of texts like 1 Enoch 14 was borne in mind. First, there was a continuity of terminology for uranographic descriptions which came out of contemplation of the relevant chapters of Ezekiel. This was early, for it is already evidenced in Enoch. Second, these sorts of revelations were connected with a specific sort of vision type which developed in Judaism in that early age, the ascent vision.

In another study we pointed out the existence and function

of the lists of revealed things which are presented in many of the apocalypses as standing at the very peak of the revelatory experience. These lists are extremely important for the understanding of the phenomenon of the apocalyptic literature since, it is only reasonable to assume, when an apocalyptic author set a particular list of things at the peak of the revelations to his seers, those things must have played a central role in his own scale of values. Such lists occur in numerous of the apocalypses, including 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 2 Apoc. Baruch.

On the basis of the nature and character of these lists we maintained that at the heart of apocalyptic literature, from its earliest discernable stages, lies not merely eschatological concern, but also a deep interest in these speculative subjects. The lists, it emerged, contain much information about cosmogony and cosmology, about angelology and meteorology, about the structure of the heavens and their denizens, the underworld and the far places of the earth. This required a reassessment of the central character of the apocalypses, for it had been the common assumption that these were chiefly eschatological in character and purpose. Now it was necessary to assume realms of speculative learning in Israel of the period before the Maccabean revolt and the place of this learning within the revealed subjects of apocalyptic speculation.

This type of speculation within the apocalyptic tradition has no clear forebears in the bible. Nonetheless, it seems

that this tradition must have existed in ancient Israel, even if it is not reflected in the Bible.

It is the antiquity of these traditions, their solid appearance in the Apocalyptic literature, their widespread occurrence in other sorts of writings (e.g. Wisdom of Solomon, Books of Adam and Eve), yet the problematic attitude to them already evinced in the biblical corpus, that makes the situation in 4 Ezra particularly intriguing. For when we examine 4 Ezra from this point of view, the results are rather surprising.

This book was written shortly before 100. That is after the Destruction of the Second Temple, in the period of Yavneh. By this time the *Book of the Watchers* of Enoch was four hundred or so years old. Daniel had been in its present shape for three hundred years. In 4 Ezra there is nothing whatsoever relating to the speculative traditions. This material is completely absent in all its obvious forms. The lists, noted in other apocalypses, do not occur. There are no heavenly journeys or ascents. The activities of the upper worlds are not discussed, angels are treated formally and with a good deal of circumspection; the secrets of the far places of the earth remain beyond the author's ken or interest.

The lack of material of this type makes 4 Ezra almost unique among the apocalypses, and certainly unique among the later ones. Its sister-book, 2 Apocalypse of Baruch, although not indulging in speculative revelations in any detail, is replete with the literary forms and language appertaining to this tradition. It need only be recalled that one of the classic lists of revealed things is precisely that in 2 Apocalypse of Baruch 59. The Apocalypse of Abraham which was written, it seems, not long after 4 Ezra and 2

Apocalypse of Baruch, is full of material related to the Hechalot tradition, as Scholem pointed out many years ago.

A decade or more ago I pointed out a very peculiar thing. In two passages in 4 Ezra occur sets of almost satirical questions. These questions are set in the mouth of an angel and are posed to Ezra in order to illustrate to him that he is truly unable to understand the heavenly realm and the superhuman, or even the workings of divine providence (4:3-12 and 5:36-39). The function of these passsages which are parallel in position and role in the first two visions, is to deny all possibility of special knowledge. Indeed, they come to deny to Ezra even knowledge of the way of Providence. In order to achieve this, the angel poses riddles which are supposed to be ridiculous, self-evidently preposterous propositions. Yet this is not clearly the case. Indeed, our attention was first drawn to them by the phrase in Ezra's response to the first set of questions (4:8):

Nor did I ascend into heaven
nor did I enter Paradise.

In a conference on Hechalot literature, I do not need to remark that these activities are not self-evidently preposterous. And this is not all.

A further examination of these questions indicated that they stem from a single list and showed its literary affinities with many of the lists of revealed things in other apocalypses. Moreover, it has a particularly close, perhaps even a literary connection with 2 Apoc. Bar. 59. There, the list of things, so preposterous to Ezra as to be used to show him how limited his understanding is, is precisely the list of things

revealed to Moses on Sinai in addition to the Torah and the Tabernacle. Furthermore, a number of the subjects revealed in these lists are also seen by the seers in detail in the course of their heavenly travels, while others lie beyond what is known to us Tabernacle. An further aspect of this list of revealed things, and similar lists in other apocalypses, is that it is almost completely without any eschatological elements. ~~from the apocalypses~~

The existence and function of these lists in the literature preceding 4 Ezra indicates that when the author of 4 Ezra adapts such a list and changes it into a series of sarcastic questions. Through this instead of affirming the contents of revelation and range of speculative knowledge, he denies its possibility. By this deliberate reapplication of a particular literary form he is making a very definite assertion. This is a polemical denial of the possibility of knowledge of the sort we have called speculative, the sort that is catalogued in the lists of revealed things. This denial is the more powerfully made for the reason that it takes a literary form, structure and text which is inherently tied to the speculative revelations and uses an adaptation of that very literary form to deny their availability. Consequently, the action of the author of 4 Ezra may not be explained as a naive or unsophisticated one. To the contrary, it is deliberate and extremely clear.

This denial is in accordance with what we have noted above, viz. the actual absence of this sort of material from 4 Ezra in every shape and way. This situation has in the past served well those scholars who would define the apocalyptic literature only in terms of eschatological

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interest. In fact, however, the position taken by 4 Ezra about speculative revelations clearly indicates that its purely eschatological range of revelation is an exception rather than the rule. A great deal is to be learned, then, from the silence and denial of this type of knowledge.

4 Ezra is presented to us as a series of seven visions. It would take far too long here for us to analyse the very careful structure of the visions. They are painstakingly orchestrated so as to relate vision type and the length of the separating fast to the revelatory dynamic of the book. The general structure is clear. The first three visions are night visions, but apparently not dreams. They are formed of dialogues between the seer and an angel/God. They discuss the questions of theodicy in various modalities and from a variety of points of view. The point of departure is the seer's inability to understand the "way of the Most High" with Israel and from this he moves, in the third vision, to aporia about His way in relationship to mankind. Throughout the angel responds to Ezra's questions by a combination of conceptual argument, parable, illustrative vision and revealed omens. Throughout, although the seer sometimes accepts the responses and on other occasions circumvents them, nonetheless his doubts and his agonizing do not lessen. He continually reverts to his questions, not satisfied by the angel's answers.

The fourth vision, which is set in a field, is of a different character. This is a waking vision. In it Ezra sees the mourning Mother Zion whom he comforts and who is transformed before his eyes to the glorious builded city.

In the previous visions, at the end, the angel had told him to fast and pray again and that he would subsequently receive revelations even more than he had already received. When Ezra sees the transformed Jerusalem and had received the explanation of it, the angel then says to him: (10:55-57)

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 called before the Most High as but few have been.

This vision, the rebuilt Jerusalem, marks the turning point of the book. It has been called the move from distress to consolation. In our view it is not merely that; the seer undergoes an experience which touches on the very heart of his being and what is most deeply concerning him. The book opens with the agony of the destruction of Jerusalem. In the vision of the future City that agony finds its solace. The comfort is not in the intellectual promise, it is in the direct experience of the future Jerusalem. Ezra is physically and spiritually exhausted by the experience and here, for the first time, these responses follow the vision but precede the interpretation. Already in this is the conversion presaged.

This overwhelming experience changes Ezra's state of mind and spirit. Indeed, the problems that had concerned him are not given any intellectually satisfying response. Instead, the dialogue, the give and take between seer and angel is abandoned. In its place, he is to experience future

Jerusalem, not in order to know its measurements or enumerate its portals, but to see and to hear.

When this has happened, the vision type shifts. The angel promises him dream visions of what will happen at end of days. Ezra then receives dreams, without lengthy preparation and agony, at night. These are the symbolic visions of the Man and the Eagle. Their promise and message are none other than the promises and the message that the angel has conveyed in the dialogues, indeed, in some respects they are less. The answers they offer leave all the basic questions of theodicy without due response. Yet these answers now they accepted by Ezra, they are satisfactory to him, they offer him comfort.

We would maintain that the change of mental state that is here being described is analogous to that of religious conversion. Descriptions of the states of mind and dynamic engendered by the preaching of John Welsley or of evangelists in North America, to take two examples of many, show remarkable analogies with the development of Ezra's emotional and mental condition. A gradually rising crescendo of agonizing, concern, repetition of questions, circling around the issues is commonly to be noted. This is not assuaged by the offering of answers in discussion or rational discourse. The rising of the pressure on the mind and spirit of the subject is such that in the end he undergoes an experience of conversion. After this experience which is emotionally and physically overwhelming, the whole of the world appears to him under a different aspect. The problems that had distressed him no longer cause distress; there is a sense of new beginning, of entering in, of rebirth. Answers

that had previously been inadequate are suddenly satisfying.

This sort of experience is not just the heritage of streams of Christianity. For example, A.D. Nock showed the relevance of this category for the pagan religion of the Hellenistic-Roman age and examples are plentiful in a variety of religious traditions. So it is not too far fetched to suggest that in this lies the true inner dynamic of 4 Ezra. This is what is being described in this fourth vision. This is why the discussions of the first three visions seem to go in circles--as Gunkel remarked many years ago the literary phenomena reflect the seer's confusion of spirit. This is why there is such a dramatic shift in the fourth vision, why the answers previously rejected are suddenly acceptable. This is the how of the consolation.

Parenthetically, it may be remarked that, if this view is accepted, it can offer a response in this particular case to the question whether, in the pseudepigraphic apocalypses, the ecstatic experience described is a reflection of something the seer had undergone. Many scholars have claimed that it is merely a literary form. Since the sort of conversion experience described in 4 Ezra has few, if any, parallels in the apocalypses of the Second Temple Period, it would seem to follow that here, at least, some experience of the author is reflected.

If this hypothesis about the conversion experience is accepted, then Ezra's concentration on the one type of religious experience, the conversion, to the exclusion of the other, the ascent vision with its speculative dimension, may also perhaps be understood. 4 Ezra seems, consequently, to present a different sort of

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visionary experience and therefore is not interested in, or
even opposed to, the speculative type. This is fairly
unique, as far as we know, in the apocalyptic literature.
Its occurrence should sensitize us to different modalities of
religious experience and the relationship between specific
types of subject matter and specific types of religious
experience.