

## Post-70 Apocalypses: 4 Ezra

- 4 Ezra is, at its core, a Jewish text of the apocalyptic genre, written around the same time as the very first Christian apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. 4 Ezra was later transmitted by Christians as part of the biblical book Ezra in some OTs, and the present form of the apocalypse thus includes some later Christian additions – mostly small statements equating the messiah (Greek: *christos*) expected by its Jewish author with Jesus (e.g., through references to his death).
- 4 Ezra is penned in the name of Ezra, a scribe, priest, and leader who lived during the fifth century BCE and who played a major role in rebuilding after the end of the Babylonian Exile (see Ezra and Nehemiah in Hebrew Bible). This apocalypse reflects on the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans with appeal to the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians. The appeal to Ezra serves to communicate hope: just as God destroyed the Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE by the Persians and the Temple was rebuilt in the fifth century BCE, so too will God will ensure the downfall of the Roman Empire and the salvation and restoration of his people, even in the face of their seemingly hopeless situation in the first century CE, even as they have been defeated by the Romans and the Temple lies in ruins.

### AFTER 70 CE

66-70 BCE – JEWISH REVOLT AGAINST ROME

70 CE = ROMAN DESTRUCTION OF THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE

70-110 CE – GOSPELS OF MARK, MATTHEW, LUKE, and JOHN WRITTEN (i.e., over 40 years after the death of Jesus)

81-96 CE: Reign of Roman emperor Domitian; era of the composition of 4 EZRA and REVELATION

132-135 CE – BAR KOKHBA REVOLT: JEWISH MESSIANIC UPRISING LEAD BY “BAR KOKHBA,” BRUTALLY QUELCHED BY ROME

ca. 200 CE – Compilation of the MISHNAH, foundational document of RABBINIC JUDAISM

**Death and the Human Soul:** 4 Ezra depicts death as well as sin as entering into the world with Adam and through his transgression (cf. Paul; and note that Eve isn't here blamed!). Just as God made Adam's body and put a spirit/soul into it to make him alive, so death is the separation of soul from the body. Likewise, the eschatological Resurrection of the Dead (see below) is described as a second Creation, whereby God rises and reanimates dead bodies, the souls of which have been kept in chambers in the earth: at the End of Time the world will fall into seven days of primeval silence, followed by seven days of cleansing re-Creation in preparation for the Last Judgment.

**Theodicy:** The central issue of 4 Ezra is theodicy (i.e., the question of the justice of God), in this case focused on the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Babylonians (here symbolizing the Romans). Like Job, Ezra asks questions of God; whereas God answered Job only with a vision of Him and the assertion of the human inability to know the divine mind, in 4 Ezra an angel comes to answer Ezra's questions by means of visions about the past and future that he shows him and explains to him. Along the way, Ezra learns of the End of Time: God's mercy operates in this world, but His judgment is only fully active in the World to Come: Rome will be punished, Israel will be vindicated; and after the eschatological Resurrection of the Dead (see below) and Last Judgment, some will rise to reward and some to punishment: the righteous (who are here defined in terms of their Law observance in general as well as chastity in particular) will dwell in the Paradise of Delight, whereas the wicked (here defined by those who do not follow God's commandments) will suffer in the Pit of Torment.

**Resurrection of the Dead:** 4 Ezra's image of the Resurrection of the Dead draws on Daniel 12 (see Segal 492-94 for full discussion). According to Daniel's view of the eschatological Judgment, however, the most righteous become like stars, and the most wicked are risen for eternal punishment, but many inbetween seem not to be resurrected at all. By contrast, 4 Ezra's view is harsher and bleaker: all humankind will be resurrected. But only a select few, a righteous remnant, go to Paradise, while the rest are wicked and are punished forever.

**Messianism:** 4 Ezra's vision of the End involves a Messiah, but in a relatively minor role. The Messiah is less like a king or priest or warrior than a judge. He ushers in the final age, but the period of his rule is just one stage along the way to God's final judgment of all humankind.

## Selections from 4 Ezra

4 Ezra 3:27-35 "And so You gave your city (i.e., Jerusalem) over into the hands of Your enemies. Are the deeds of those who inhabit Babylon then any better, that they should have the dominion over Zion (i.e., over Israel)?... For I have seen how You permit them to sin, and how You have spared wicked doers, but You have destroyed Your people, and have preserved Your enemies... Are they then of Babylon better than they of Zion? Is there any other people that knows You beside Israel? Or has any so believed Your covenants as Jacob? And yet their reward appears not, and their labor bears no fruit: for I have gone here and there through the Gentiles, and I see that they flow in wealth, and do not think upon Your commandments. Weigh therefore our wickedness now in the balance, and theirs also who dwell in the world; and so shall Your name no where be found but in Israel. When was it that they which dwell upon the earth have not sinned in Your sight? What people have so kept Your commandments?

4 Ezra 7:19-70: And he said unto me. There is no judge above God, and none that have understanding above the Highest. For there be many that perish in this life, because they despise the Law of God that is set before them. For God have given strait commandment to such as came, what they should do to live, even as they came, and what they should observe to avoid punishment. Nevertheless they were not obedient unto him; but spoke against him, and imagined vain things; And deceived themselves by their wicked deeds; and said of the most High, that he is not; and knew not his ways: But his Law have they despised, and denied his covenants; in his statutes have they not been faithful, and have not performed his works.

... Behold, the time shall come, that these tokens which I have told you shall come to pass, and the bride shall appear, and she coming forth shall be seen, that now is withdrawn from the earth. And whosoever is delivered from the foresaid evils shall see my wonders...

And the world shall be turned into the old silence for seven days, like as in the former judgments: so that no man shall remain. And after seven days the world, that yet not awake, shall be raised up, and that shall die that is corrupt. And the earth shall restore those that are asleep in her, and so shall the dust those that dwell in silence, and the secret places shall deliver those souls that were committed unto them. And the most High shall appear upon the seat of judgment, and misery shall pass away, and the long suffering shall have an end: But judgment only shall remain, truth shall stand, and faith shall wax strong; And the work shall follow, and the reward shall be shown, and the good deeds shall be of force, and wicked deeds shall bear no rule. ...

This present life is not the end where much glory doth abide... But the day of doom shall be the end of this time, and the beginning of the immortality for to come, wherein corruption is past, intemperance is at an end, infidelity is cut off, righteousness is grown, and truth is sprung up. Then shall no man be able to save him that is destroyed, nor to oppress him that have gotten the victory.

I (i.e., Ezra) answered then and said, This is my first and last saying, that it had been better not to have given the earth unto Adam: or else, when it was given him, to have restrained him from sinning. For what profit is it for men now in this present time to live in heaviness, and after death to look for punishment? O Adam, what have you done? Though it was you that sinned, you art not fallen alone, but we all that come of you.  
For what profit is it unto us, if there be promised us an immortal time, whereas we have done the works that bring death? And that there is promised us an everlasting hope, whereas ourselves being most wicked are made vain? And that there are laid up for us dwellings of health and safety, whereas we have lived wickedly? And that the glory of the most High is kept to defend them which have led a wary life, whereas we have walked in the most wicked ways of all? And that there should be shown a paradise, whose fruit endures for ever, wherein is security and medicine, since we shall not enter into it? ... And that the faces of them which have used abstinence shall shine above the stars, whereas our faces shall be blacker than darkness? For while we lived and committed iniquity, we considered not that we should begin to suffer for it after death.

Then answered he me, and said, This is the condition of the battle, which man that is born upon the earth shall fight; That, if he be overcome, he shall suffer as you hast said: but if he get the victory, he shall receive the thing that I say. For this is the life whereof Moses spake unto the people while he lived, saying, "Choose life, that you may live" (Deut 30:19)...

I answered then, and said, I know, Lord, that the most High is called merciful, in that he have mercy upon them which are not yet come into the world, And upon those also that turn to his Law; And that he is patient, and long suffers those that have sinned, as his creatures; And that he is bountiful, for he is ready to give where it needs; And that he is of great mercy, for he multiplies more and more mercies to them that are present, and that are past, and also to them which are to come. For if he shall not multiply his mercies, the world would not continue with them that inherit therein. And he forgives; for if he did not so of his goodness, that they which have committed iniquities might be eased of them, the ten thousandth part of men should not remain living. And being judge, if he should not forgive them that are cured with his word, and put out the multitude of contentions, There should be very few left in an innumerable multitude.