A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions*

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In 1974 I published a paper arguing that behind the pseudepigraphic presentations of the religious experiences attributed to apocalyptic seers by the Jewish apocalypses of the Second Temple period, there lay a kernel of actual visionary activity or analogous religious experience.[1] This was not the regnant view then. Indeed, it had long been a prevalent opinion of scholarship that pseudepigraphic apocalypses are in some sense forgeries and that they present completely fictitious narratives about their claimed authors, with no roots in reality. The actual course of historical happenings might be presented in a symbolic vision, often culminating in prediction, but the framework, the seer, and his doings or feelings (there are no women among the supposed authors) are fictional. At most, the pseudepigraphic framework may hint at the general circumstances in which the work was composed. A Baruch or Jeremiah work about the destruction of the First Temple might well have been written after the destruction of the Second, but that had to be proved on other grounds than correspondence between the fictional situation and that of the author. (Indeed, the book of Baruch was not written in the context of the destruction of the Temple, nor the Qumran Jeremiah Apocryphon.) Scholars regarded words and actions ascribed to the pseudepigraphic author as fiction.[2] Moreover, they of-

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[1]Michael E. Stone, "Apocalyptic, Vision, or Hallucination?" *Milla Wa Milla* 14 (1974) 47–56; repr. in *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha with Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition* (SVTP 9; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991) 419–28.

[2]In fact, this is an oversimplification. *4 Ezra* was written after the destruction, but despite the overall temporal congruity, the framework is not a full one-for-one equivalence. Though the

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ten maintained that pseudepigraphic apocalypses were forwarding one or another particular and partisan viewpoint, and using a literary fiction to do so.

As a result of such attitudes, scholars studying these writings deal with their composition, date, and coherence by basing themselves on the "more objective" criteria of literary form and tradition criticism; on historical grammar (if applicable); on translation characteristics; on the extent of the *vaticinium ex eventu* in historical overviews; on insights yielded by other, more recent methodologies; and so forth. In these studies, the religious life and experience ascribed to the pseudepigraphic authors are rarely taken into account.

This is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of scholarly attitudes to vision experiences in the field of biblical studies. The biblical prophets clearly wrote about undergoing varied sorts of visionary and dream experiences, auditions and possessions. The authors of Psalms yearn for the deity's presence in language that goes far beyond the metaphorical;[3] stories in Samuel are unambiguous. However, when faced with the book of Ezekiel's reports of visionary phenomena, for example, scholars are uncomfortable at the idea that the prophet is reporting something he believed had happened to him while in an alternate state of consciousness. Thus, Eichrodt comments on Ezekiel 8–10 that "it must be freely admitted that this is an event *quite unique* [emphasis mine] in all prophetic literature."[4] His embarrassment emerges even more clearly when he says: "in our prophet there emerged once more a capacity for psychic experiences which *most of the writing prophets had eliminated* [emphasis mine]."[5] The attitudes permeating this remark need no further comment. Zimmerli, in his great commentary on Ezekiel, says: "First of all we must affirm that . . . we are certainly not dealing with a cliché-like stereotyped conception. . . . [T]he ecstatic phenomenon not only meant a physical experience, but spiritually the crossing of the threshold dividing normal objective perception from the underlying reality which is not discernible in the sober light of day."[6] No longer are the older,

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temporal framework can be shown, on various grounds, to be roughly accurate, we hesitate to say the book was written in Rome because the author says he was writing in Babylon; see *4 Ezra* 3:1 and Michael E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1990) 10.

[3]"My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (Ps 42:2); "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps 63:1); "I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. [Selah]" (Ps 143:6); see also Ps 34:9.

[4]Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (trans. Cosslett Quinn; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 120. He adds, "We can understand why some . . . feel the details of the prophetic vision to be an apocryphal invention. . . . They prefer to think of a visit by the prophet to the temple."

[5]Ibid.

[6]Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (2 vols.; trans. Ronald E. Clements; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 1:234.

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rationalistic explanations of Ezekiel's experience acceptable, yet Zimmerli does not embrace this insight in his presentation of Ezekiel's prophetic experience.

The following passage from Ezekiel is unambiguous:

> In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there. I looked, and there was a figure that looked like a human being; below what appeared to be its loins it was fire, and above the loins it was like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming amber. It stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head; and the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north. (Ezek 8:1–3a, NRSV)

In discussions with colleagues, I have raised the question of how religious experience is to be handled by students of ancient texts and have frequently been told that the prophet's experience or state of mind is too difficult to ascertain. It is not a verifiable factor and should be used in sound scholarly argument as a last resort, if at all. Even Eichrodt and Zimmerli, who accept that Ezekiel did experience the vision, nonetheless do not incorporate this factor into their understanding of the prophet's activity. Instead, they isolate it and stress its uniqueness. This aspect of biblical prophecy causes discomfort.[7]

In some fields of learning, religious experience is simply part of the evidence, freely considered and utilized by scholars endeavoring to understand the past. One need only think of the history of medieval Western spirituality to realize this, or of Hasidism, or a dozen other instances. Yet in study of the apocalyptic literature, indeed of biblical literature overall, religious experience is not usually taken into account, though sometimes its presence is acknowledged.

In the course of writing a commentary on *4 Ezra* two decades ago, I encountered grave difficulties in understanding the book's coherence and overall dynamic. To my considerable surprise, I realized that these could be resolved most readily if I posited the existence of a complex religious experience which the book presented by the agency of the pseudepigraphic author. This religious experience made the book cohere and provided its central message. I formulated it then by saying, "our claim therefore is that the thread that holds the book together is the Odyssey of Ezra's soul."[8] In fact, I now realize that the view I had espoused actually involved

[7]Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 22; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983) does not broach the issue at all.

[8]Stone, *Fourth Ezra,* 32. We discuss *4 Ezra* in detail and present our detailed arguments for the understanding of the book presented here, as well as for the relationship of Visions 1–3 and 5–7 to Vision 4, in our work *Fourth Ezra*. We had already broached another aspect of the book's coherency in Michael E. Stone, "Coherence and Inconsistency in the Apocalypses: the Case of 'The End' in *4 Ezra*," *JBL* 102 (1983) 229–43.

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a double assumption: First, that the book is about a series of religious encounters that the putative author, Ezra, underwent and that taking account of this aspect of the book is central to understanding it. Second, that this was not only a narrative about the religious experience of a fictional character, because behind the narrative lay the religious experience and sensibility of the author. For this book did have an author.

Before proceeding with the discussion, however, we should note the chief objections facing the proposition I am making here, i.e., the main arguments that can be marshalled against using the religious experience of the apocalyptic authors as a factor in understanding their pseudepigraphic works.

1. The pseudepigraphic framework of the apocalypses is, to a greater or lesser extent, based on a convention. By attributing the pseudepigraphical work to an ancient wise man (such as Enoch) or prophet (such as Isaiah or Moses), its writer invokes a stereotypical framework of which visions are a part. The purpose of the attribution to an ancient prophet or sage is primarily to invest the actual author's words with the authority of antiquity, and this purpose is well served by attributing visions to the pseudepigraphic author.

2. The apocalypse is a highly traditional genre, so much so that, in a number of instances, direct lines of filiation can be drawn between different apocalypses (such as *2* and *3 Baruch* or, explicitly, between Daniel and *4 Ezra*).[9] Most apocalypses, from the oldest apocalypses such as *1 Enoch* on, describe ecstatic states in very similar terms. Moreover, in a number of respects, that technical terminology is drawn from biblical prophecy, particularly from Ezekiel and Zechariah.[10] Terminological similarity, so it can be maintained, does not demonstrate that the authors underwent similar experiences. To the contrary, when the actual authors came to describe the experience of their literary heroes, Enoch or Ezra or Baruch, they drew on a pool of traditional language and descriptions. The apocalypses' traditional character suffices, consequently, to explain the resemblances between their fictional descriptions of the ecstatic state of the seers.

3. Had the authors been drawing on their own religious experience in the literary labor of describing the seer's experience, their descriptions would have been characterized by spontaneity. Instead, we find them using traditional language and formulations.

4. Even if we admit that in some cases a kernel of the writer's own religious experience does lie behind some literary descriptions, we cannot determine in which instances this is so, because the apocalypses are so traditional in character. They describe religious experiences in the same terms.

[9]See, e.g., *4 Ezra* 12:11.

[10]Michael E. Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (CRINT 2.2; Assen/Philadelphia: van Gorcum/Fortress, 1984) 384–92.

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Before proceeding to discuss these propositions, let us examine the fourth vision of *4 Ezra*. The author sets forth his experience as seven visions, each distinct and separate from the others. The first three visions present the seer's movement from his initial quandary, pain, and bewilderment to a measure of understanding. They use a similar structural pattern that is abruptly broken and brought to crisis and resolution in the powerful experience of the fourth vision. Two dreams follow, at the end of which Ezra sings the Almighty's praise. The seventh vision, the story of the revelation of the Torah to Ezra, concludes the book.

Each of the first four visions commences with a similar description: Ezra is weeping and mourning; suddenly inspiration seizes him and he speaks to God. He is not said to be among the people or in a public place, but on his bed at night. Yet what befalls him is not a dream but a different type of experience, which we may call a revelatory dialogue. Later, when he does dream (in Visions 5 and 6), he is quite aware that he is dreaming and states it explicitly.[11]

In the first speech of Vision 1, Ezra reproaches God for Zion's fate. You created humankind, he says; you allow humans to sin and then you punish them for sinning. Your way of running the world, Ezra declares, leads directly to the destruction of Zion. Suddenly he stops. What has he said? In Scripture, God reprimands Israel for sinning and justly punishes Israel's disobedience. How different is Ezra, as he angrily rebukes the Creator! His words challenge the basic axiom of Israelite and Jewish thought—that God is just in his dealings with humans. God's actions towards Israel do not exhibit divine grace but have led directly to the Temple's destruction. The basic solution offered by his angelic interlocutor is that the way of the Most High will prove just at the end of days.

The second vision is preceded by Ezra's address to God on the election of Israel. "If thou dost really hate thy people, they should be punished at thy own hands" (5:30).[12] Again he is told that the end cannot be hastened: judgment was created with the world and is inherent in it.

Just as the second vision had opened with election, the third vision opens with creation, but returns and highlights the idea of election. "If the world has indeed been created for us, why do we not possess our world as an inheritance?" (6:59), asks Ezra, combining the two themes. In this long and complex vision, Ezra is led through a series of progressive steps in his understanding: first he learns in detail and accepts the fates awaiting the righteous and the wicked. This leads him to the second central question of the book: How is it that God created so many in the world and will redeem so few? Because the seer has accepted the idea of reward and

[11]*4 Ezra* 11:1; 13:1. The seer's experience in Vision 7 is also atypical: see Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 33–35.
[12]Translations of *4 Ezra* are cited from our modification of the RSV, as used in Stone, *Fourth Ezra*.

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punishment, the issue of the few and the many becomes acute. The angel's response is that God rejoices over the few righteous but does not grieve over the many who perish (7:49–61). Ezra tries to mitigate God's severity and prays for mercy.

In the course of his long interchange with the angel, Ezra no longer questions God's conduct of the world. He has moved from his position at the beginning of the first two visions; he has accepted the angel's basic teaching, that Ezra and those like him are promised reward.[13]

The fourth vision is connected in many ways with the preceding, but its setting signals that new events will happen.[14] Its introduction contains the familiar themes of the seer's distress and onset of speech. However, Ezra is now in a new location, in a field outside the city, where he remains until the end of the last, seventh vision. Before each of the preceding visions he had fasted, wept, and prayed. Now he abstains from meat and wine and eats wild flowers, a practice that is intermediate between the fasts of Visions 1–3 and the absence of any fasting or food discipline in Visions 5 and 6.

As before, inspiration possesses him. He broaches problems in the concept of the Torah, heavenly in essence yet disobeyed by humans. The ensuing vision, however, does not respond to these issues. Ezra, in the field, sees a woman mourning and weeping. "Then I dismissed the thoughts with which I had been engaged, and turned to her," he says (9:39), and he abandons the issue of Torah, and with it, all the questions that have preoccupied him since the first vision. A turning point has been reached.

The woman relates that, barren for thirty years, she prayed to God, who eventually granted her a son. She and her husband rejoiced, and raised him with love. However, on the happy evening of his nuptials he fell down dead. She had mourned until the second evening and fled to the field, resolved to fast there until she died.

The parallels between the woman and Ezra are most suggestive. Ezra's vision culminating in promised redemption takes place after thirty years (3:1), while the woman receives the child after thirty years (9:45). She fasts, weeps, and mourns her loss just as Ezra did before each of Visions 1–3. Later, the reversed pattern is completed: Ezra upbraids, instructs, and comforts the woman, just as the angel had upbraided, instructed, and comforted him.

Ezra's new role as comforter is highlighted by a series of close parallel statements made about Ezra here and about the angel previously: he reprises the angel's earlier role. This can happen because Ezra has accepted fully what the angel said

[13]Dan Merkur interprets Vision 3 as a record of an only partially successful visionary experience: see Daniel Merkur, "The Visionary Practices of Jewish Apocalyptists," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society* (ed. L. Bryce Boyer and Simon A. Grolnik; vol. 14; Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press, 1989) 119–48, esp. 131–33.

[14]See Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 29 and 311.

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to him in preceding visions. Thus, for example, he comforts the woman with the words, "all go to perdition, and a multitude of them are destined for destruction" (10:10): this is the fate of most humans, Zion is mourning her children, so how can you grieve the loss of a single child? What is striking is that Ezra proffers the woman here precisely that teaching which he himself refused to accept at the end of the third vision, that few are saved and many damned.[15]

"If you acknowledge God's decree to be just" (10:16), he says, you will find comfort, while in the extraordinary address with which Vision 1 opened, he had cast profound doubt on God's justice. He offers wholeheartedly to the woman that comfort he himself could not fully accept when it was offered to him. What a change in the course of the first three visions! Again, his mourning for Zion re-asserts itself. With that, Vision 1 had opened, and mourning for Zion completely dominates this fourth vision. It is the meaning of the woman's tale that becomes the mainspring of Ezra's eventual comfort. His deep distress over the destruction of Zion was channeled by the presence of the woman's grief and the human need to console her. The act of reaching out to her was the catalyst that brought him to internalize his newly integrated worldview. This episode is permeated by deep psychological insight.

Suddenly (10:25–27) the woman is transformed before his very eyes into a city with huge foundations. Her countenance becomes bright and shining, and flashes like lightning; she utters a loud cry, and the earth shakes. Ezra's vision, his hearing, and his very physical orientation are disturbed. He is deeply frightened by what he is experiencing. He loses consciousness and, as he faints, he calls for his angelic guide, crying that his prayer for illumination has brought about his death.

> And it came to pass, while I was talking to her, behold, her face suddenly shone exceedingly, and her countenance flashed like lightning, so that I was too frightened to approach her, and my heart was terrified. While I was wondering what this meant, behold, she suddenly uttered a loud and fearful cry, so that the earth shook at her voice. And I looked, and behold, the woman was no longer visible to me, but there was an established city, and a place of huge foundations showed itself. Then I was afraid, and cried with a loud voice and said, "Where is the angel Uriel, who came to me at first? For it was he who brought me into this overpowering bewilderment; my end has become corruption, and my prayer a reproach." (10:25–28)

A very powerful experience is being described, unlike the seer's reactions to the revelations in the first three visions. Nor does he react thus to the dreams in Visions 5 and 6. There is nothing like it in the other Jewish apocalypses.[16]

[15]Ibid., 312 and 318–21.

[16]Visions of women/cities recur in later texts, but *4 Ezra* appears to be the first; see also the study by Edith McEwan Humphrey, *The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic*

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In its intensity, this experience corresponds to the extreme pressure of unrelieved stress evident in the first part of the vision, which precipitated the role reversal. It resembles the major sort of reorientation of personality usually associated with religious "intensification," a powerful and sudden integrating internalization of religious beliefs previously assented to intellectually. This may be called, not quite accurately, conversion. The stress precipitates this intense experience and it results in a reorientation of the seer's worldview.

> As I was speaking these words, behold, the angel who had come to me at first came to me, and he looked upon me as I lay there like a corpse and I was deprived of my understanding. Then he grasped my right hand and strengthened me and set me on my feet, and said to me, "What is the matter with you? And why are you troubled? And why are your understanding and the thoughts of your mind troubled?"
>
> I said to him, "Because you have forsaken me! For I did as you directed, and, behold! I saw, and still see, what I am unable to explain."
>
> He said to me, "Stand up like a man, and I will instruct you."
>
> I said, "Speak, my lord; only do not forsake me, lest I die before my time. For I have seen what I did not know, and I have heard what I do not understand. Or is my mind deceived, and my soul dreaming? Now therefore I entreat you to give your servant an explanation of this." (10:29–37)

The same angel appears as in the first visions, linking this unusual vision experience to them, and interprets the vision to Ezra (10:38–54). The woman is Jerusalem; the thirty years of barrenness are the three thousand years before sacrifices were offered in it; the birth of the son is the building of the Temple; his death, the city's destruction. Ezra comforts her and is shown her true, future glory. Here, for the first time in the book, the revelation to Ezra is described as "many secrets," a term applied only to revelations to Abraham and Moses (10:38). A change has taken place, and from this point on Ezra receives more and deeper revelations of secrets and takes on a full prophetic role.

This vision as a whole is different from all the other visions in the book. Following activities designed to induce an alternate state of consciousness, as happened on the three previous occasions, Ezra is moved to deliver an address, which is centered on Torah. But after he completes the address, the usual angelophany does not take place. Instead, he sees the mourning woman. Nothing suggests a dream vision or a revelatory context. The text just says, "I lifted up my eyes and saw a woman on my right" (9:38).

Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas (JSPSup 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995). None of the later texts describes a major physical and emotional response to the transformation of a woman into a city like that portrayed here. Jerusalem as a mother already figures in the Hebrew Bible: Isa 50:1; Jer 50:12; Hos 2:4, 4:5; note also Gal 4: 26; Bar 4:16, 19–23, 36–37 and 5:5–6.

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What we are proposing happened is a fairly complex psychological process which involved a conversion-like "intensification" experience, a very powerful waking vision, and then a "death" experience, a revelatory vision and blessing. The whole book had commenced with Ezra's pain over the destruction of the Temple. During the first three visions, he accepted, grudgingly, the angel's assurance that God's destruction of Jerusalem was just, both in terms of Israel's election and in terms of His activity as Creator. Moreover, he came to the edge of accepting, unwillingly it seems, the idea of the few saved and the many destined for destruction. We would maintain that though Ezra had, by the end of the third vision, assented in his conscious mind to these ideas, he had not yet internalized them, and his consciousness was not yet oriented in terms of them.[17]

The psychological mechanics of the first part of Vision 4 are clear. There is a role shift between Ezra and the angel. Throughout the first three visions, Ezra had been the one who lamented, who wept, and who argued against the angel's logic. Now, in comforting the weeping woman, he comes to play the angel's role, while the weeping woman functions as Ezra did in the first three visions. At the surface level, Ezra perceives the woman's need and responds to it, thus curtailing the vision experience he had commenced: "Then I dismissed the thoughts with which I had been engaged" (9:39). In the course of comforting the woman, Ezra employs all the arguments that the angel had used to comfort him, and he sets Zion's mourning at the heart of his words. This, we hypothesize, was the process by which Ezra internalized the angel's assurances. Up to this point Ezra had assented to them, but they had not changed his inner orientation. Now, in comforting the woman, whom we understand to be an externalization of his pain,[18] Ezra internalizes the angelic comfort he himself had been given. This crucial moment in his development marks the inception of a conversion, not the conversion of the unbeliever to belief, but the sudden renewal and reorientation, the "intensification," that happens to believers and that has been described frequently.[19] The way this takes place is well known: doubts and tensions peak and then, in a major psychic event, the propositions that had previously been accepted "intellectually" are profoundly internalized and all doubts and tensions are resolved. A feeling of joy and liberation follows an explosive religious experience. Lewis Rambo in his studies of conversion has called this process "revitalization" or "identification."[20] For Ezra it culminates in a powerful visual image (10:24) accompanied by terror. Then a loud sound comes, and the

[17]The above retelling of the book is indebted to my previous summary in Michael E. Stone, "II Esdras," in *The Books of the Bible* (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson; 2 vols.; New York: Scribners, 1989) 2.21–34.

[18]See Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 31–32, where this is set forth.

[19]Ibid., 32–33.

[20]Lewis R. Rambo, "Current Research on Religious Conversion," *RelSRev* 8 (1982) 146–59; idem, "Conversion," *ER* 4:73–79. See further Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 31–32.

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earth shakes. The disorientation affects vision, hearing, and balance. Ezra falls as a dead man; he experiences the visionary's trance death often referred to in the apocalypses. He "lay there like a corpse and [he] was deprived of [his] understanding" (10:30). He is disorientated; he seeks his prior angelic guide. To Uriel he says the extraordinary words, "I did as you directed and, behold! I saw, and still see, what I am unable to explain" (10:32). He has carried out the angel's instructions to prepare for a revelation or vision and has undergone something quite different from what he expected (9:23–25).

The next major stage of his visionary experience follows on this. The angel tells him the woman's secret, that she is Jerusalem, and the meaning of her tale. Ezra's own mourning for Jerusalem, the angel asserts, evokes the vision of the city's glory: "For now the Most High, seeing that you are sincerely grieved and profoundly distressed for her, has shown you the brilliance of her glory, and the loveliness of her beauty" (10:50).

This is not all. A final element in the text hints at one further stage of this process. The angel says to Ezra: "Therefore do not be afraid, and do not let your heart be terrified; but go in and see the splendor and vastness of the building, as far as it is possible for your eyes to see it, and afterward you will hear as much as your ears can hear. For you are more blessed than many, and you have been named before the Most High, as but few have been" (10:55–57). On the face of it, this passage is mysterious. However, the refrain "*as much as* your eyes can see" and "*as much as* your ears can hear" implies that what will be seen and heard surpasses human capabilities. This is a clear indicator that what is envisioned is the experience of the divine and the heavenly. "City," we suggest, is another language to designate the heavenly reality, like the Merkabah and the Hekalot or temples.[21] The heart of Jerusalem is the house of the Lord; the Godhead's presence is the heart of the heavenly Jerusalem. Ezra's human senses cannot apprehend the whole, but only "as much as . . . ."[22] Earlier in the book, before the intensification experience, the very possibility of such knowledge had been vehemently and strikingly denied (4:7–8; 5:36–38).[23] Now Ezra is commanded to enter the heavenly city and experience as much of the heavenly reality as his human ears and eyes can grasp. This is another in the series of very early references to direct experience of the heavenly.

Our thesis is that only if the fourth vision is understood in this way can the problems inherent in the first three visions and in the interrelationship of the book's parts be resolved. We should, however, be explicit in stating that this approach to the book is quite different from those of nearly all previous scholars.[24] We take

[21]This proposal will be the subject of further research.

[22]Intriguingly, in the conversion experience just discussed, Ezra's senses of sight and hearing were unable to bear the woman's transformation into the City.

[23]Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 84 and references there.

[24]The exception is the always perceptive Hermann Gunkel in "Das vierte Buch Esra," in *Die*

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the religious experience ascribed to the pseudepigraphic author very seriously as presenting the axis around which the book is orientated. This works and it accounts for the textual evidence, which heuristically is one of the best demonstrations of its overall plausibility. This position is not adequate, however, nor does it draw out this unusual episode's full implications.

Let us briefly consider three further points:

1. The four objections raised above against this type of argument do not seem to hold. Nearly all of them disappear the moment the "reality" of the religious experience can be demonstrated. This complex of visions is unlike anything to be found elsewhere in the anterior Jewish apocalypses; so objections deriving from the conventional or traditional character of the visions disappear. Moreover, the particular nature of this description seems to depart in its character and content from what we find in the more perfunctory descriptions in some other works.

2. The question remains, however, of the relationship of the narrated visionary event to the experience of the writer him/herself. It seems to us that, though it cannot be proved, the psychological mechanics that lie so close to the surface of this vision are unlikely to have been invented, cut out of whole cloth, by the author. Whoever composed this vision had direct knowledge of the psychological and ecstatic dynamics described, either through personal experience or by immersion in a tradition in which such descriptions, based on real experiences, were current. The sophistication of the descriptions here admits no other explanation. The hint at mystical or apocalyptic ascent activity in 10:55–59 makes such an understanding even more likely.

3. We should stress that this instance, precisely because of its distinctiveness,[25] is a powerful argument for the cultivation of deliberate ecstatic techniques among the circles that produced some of the apocalypses. The case having been made, however, we are required to reassess other apocalypses, of very much more traditional character. The hidden, modern assumption that visionary experience will bring about nontraditional, even spontaneous, compositions must be questioned. Even Vision 4 in Fourth Ezra is cast as a pseudepigraphical vision. We know that shamans in their ascents related the journeys of their separable souls in fixed literary forms.[26] The biblical prophets wrote their experiences in fine poetry, using the standard tropes of Hebrew poetic composition. The use of conventional forms does not contradict the existence of the experience. However, it does make it more difficult to demonstrate in any given case.

Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des alten Testaments (ed. E. Kautzsch; Tübingen: Mohr, 1900) 2.335–50.

[25]Below, we refer to Dan Merkur's observations about the cultivation of techniques of vision induction. We have dealt with this matter, including the elusive nature of the evidence, in Stone, *Selected Studies*, 428. For the difficulties, compare Stone, *Fourth Ezra,* 114, 303.

[26]See also the beginning of Hesiod's *Works and Days*.

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Throughout this paper, I have talked of "Ezra" as if he were indistinguishable from the author, and of Ezra's experience as if it were exactly the author's own. Yet there is a certain naïveté in this position and, as the final point of this essay, I would like to refine it.

I just observed that it is well known that vision or trance experience, in various societies, can be transmitted in a fixed, highly traditional literary form, often technically rather sophisticated. This is relevant when we think of the conventional and stereotypical nature of the apocalyptic vision descriptions; in other words, when we come to assess the fourth "objection" noted above. However, in apparent tension with this assertion, I have founded the case for the genuineness of *4 Ezra*'s religious experience precisely on its distinct character. That character makes the initial argument easier and more readily convincing in the scholarly world; the fourth vision of *4 Ezra* is unusual, both in its form and in the experience it describes. Because the experience described is unusual, we do not have to take possible literary influences from earlier writings into consideration as its source. Thus, the question of the description's source becomes acute. Since it resonates clearly with psychological experiences and processes known to occur,[27] it is most plausible to assume that its source is direct or mediated knowledge of religious experience.

Now, once the door is opened to this factor, even in an unusual work, certain implications inevitably follow. If we accept the idea that religious experience, including alternate states of consciousness, is part, indeed a central part, of what *4 Ezra* is about, then we must envisage the possibility that this factor is present also in other works of the time. They are religious works, by religious people, and we must consider religious experience when we interpret them. The traditional and stereotypical features of the visionary descriptions in other works do not gainsay this possibility, indeed likelihood. Yet in most specific cases, it is difficult to demonstrate conclusively from within the work itself that this factor is present and it is difficult for scholars to know how to take account of it, precisely because it is recounted in conventional and stereotypical language. The pseudepigraphic character of the apocalypses compounds this difficulty.

My final observations are directed towards those who would deny completely the reality of these religious experiences, claiming that the descriptions in the apocalypses are "literary." First, there remains a good deal of cogency in D. S. Russell's observation that the very vision form itself implies, not that an actual vision experience lies behind each and every description of a vision, but that such visions did take place in the society in which some fictional vision experiences are written.[28] Indeed, religious visionary experiences, described in so many works of late antiquity, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were a part of the culture of the time.

[27]See Merkur, "The Visionary Practices."

[28]D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westmin-

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The absence of such factors, not their presence, would demand our attention. This observation is most significant for understanding the religious world of ancient Judaism, nascent Christianity, and contemporary pagan religion.

But there is more: it is well known that whatever the psychological characterization of a religious experience might be, the one who underwent it can only talk about it in the language of his/her culture.[29] This is true in a developed way in the sophisticated presentations of trance experience observed and discussed by anthropologists and historians of religion.[30] It is equally true of the language used to describe all mystical and other sorts of religious experiences. The psychological experiences of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others may be similar, yet when they come to describe those experiences, each of them speaks the symbolic and religious language of his/her culture and tradition. How does this bear on arguments about the literary or experiential character of apocalyptic visions? It shows the antinomy to be false. Apocalyptic writers have to use the cultural language of their day and social context; *there is no other language for them to use*. Determining whether a religious experience lies behind the language must be done, if it is possible, on other grounds than the traditional nature of the description as either a positive or a negative factor. Yet, once this insight is incorporated into the analysis of ancient texts, the results may be rather surprising.

Furthermore, scholars have argued that various groups of apocalypses are dependent on one another: that *4 Ezra* depends on Daniel and, for that matter, the later Ezra/Esdras apocalypses on *4 Ezra*, the different Enochic works in Ethiopic and Slavonic on one another, and so forth. Merkur has maintained that the descriptions of vision inception in the apocalypses reflect the deliberate practice of techniques designed to induce alternate states of consciousness.[31] This may be doubted by some; that there were schools, circles, or groups that cultivated apocalypses is, however, generally accepted.[32] Such apocalyptic schools were the

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ster, 1964) 158–73, esp. 164–66. Such a position is taken, for example, by Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 96–114.

[29]This appears to be obvious, of course. Apropos dreams, the same point is made tellingly by E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) 102–34. Gershom Scholem comments, "In general, then, the mystic's experience tends to confirm the religious authority under which he lives; its theology and symbols are projected into his mystical experience, but do not spring from it" (*On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* [NY: Schocken Books, 1970] 9); and again, "the outward focuses of mystical religion within the orbit of a given religion are to a large extent shaped by the positive contents and values glorified by that religion," idem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [NY: Schocken Books, 1954] 10).

[30]See Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 140–41.

[31]Merkur, "The Visionary Practices," 119–48.

[32]So already, in part, Russell, *Method and Message*, 132–34; see also Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," 383–84; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 29–30.

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contexts in which the religious/symbolic language of the visions was "spoken" and, if Merkur is even partly correct, techniques of vision induction were practiced. If a member of such a school experienced a vision, he/she spoke not just the religious or symbolic language of his/her culture, but in a deliberately cultivated religious or symbolic language. Taking this consideration into account, it becomes difficult to see what a "merely" literary description of an apocalyptic vision might have been. Religious experience always stood in the background, whether at first, second, or third remove. The challenge is how to assess it and how to integrate it into our understanding of ancient literature.

Thus, in the end we have no clear response to Objection 4 above. We cannot yet (and indeed may never be able to) provide a litmus test that will tell us in which work the author is relating his/her own experience through the seer and in which he/she is drawing on a transmitted pool of knowledge in describing what went on in the world of the pseudepigraphic author. Perhaps reading the works with this factor in mind will itself lead to the emergence of tools or criteria to facilitate in this task. The consideration of the fourth vision of *4 Ezra* is a good example of a relevant instance.

So, to conclude this essay. We maintain that the factor of religious experience serves as a key to the understanding of Vision 4 of *4 Ezra*, and indeed, of the whole book. If one accepts this argument, it has implications for how we read other pseudepigraphical apocalypses. Religious experience is not a panacea, a key to unlock all scholarly aporias, but it becomes a factor to be taken into account, and not just to be noted grudgingly when the facts of the book force it upon us. In the end, it should not strike us as very surprising that religious men and women in antiquity had a spiritual life, that religious experience formed a part of their world. They talked of it in conventional, traditional terms, using the language of their culture and perhaps of their particular school or group. That raises challenges for scholars. This essay does not claim to have exhausted even the theoretical consideration of this phenomenon. If we are even partly right, however, then a considerable rethinking of our approach to the literature is demanded. The fruit of this labor will enrich our search for understanding.

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