



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2015.08.05

Hindy Najman, *Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future: An Analysis of 4 Ezra*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xi + 193. ISBN: 9781107006188. Cloth. \$90.00.

**Dereck Daschke
Truman State University**

Hindy Najman's new analysis of *4 Ezra* offers a fascinating approach to understanding the way that common feature of Jewish apocalyptic literature, the historical review, functions as the key to this text. She posits that in the wake of the trauma of the destruction of the Second Temple, *4 Ezra* essentially constitutes a "reboot" of the Jewish historical narrative, akin to what certain superhero franchises will do from time to time: re-imagining familiar figures in a radically altered timeline, with a new backstory and future trajectory. In a world where the fall of Jerusalem – again – and subsequent Diaspora has thrown into doubt the authority of ancient Jewish scripture, place, and prophets, *4 Ezra* presents "a past in which the Second Temple was never built. Thus, the entire Second Temple period never occurred, along with its perceived inability to capture the glory of its predecessor, and the second destruction, with all its traumatic consequences, never happened" (17). The goal of this rewriting of history, says Najman, is to offer "radical hope" in the wake of trauma – that is, hope that emerges from an understanding of one's circumstances that lies outside of what is apparent, an idea she borrows from Jonathan Lear's 2006 study of the Crow Indians after the American conquest of their ancestral lands (128). For the Jews of *4 Ezra*'s time, as for the Crow of the last century, that radical hope was manifested by rethinking, in writing, about the past. In *4 Ezra*, as an apocalypse, writing took the form of "revelation inflected by destruction" (5). Najman examines the nature of that revelation in three discrete aspects of the text.

Chapter two presents the ways in which the Ezra of *4 Ezra* transforms a variety of scriptural figures who seem to have served as prototypes of the apocalyptic seer, not the least of which, of course, is the Ezra of Ezra-Nehemiah. Najman here, intriguingly, invokes Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas on the authorial persona of an ancient work (Homer) as the product of streams of tradition that are unrelated until they are manifested in the figure giving voice to the text. Most significant in these traditions is the development of the legacy of the prophet Moses, *qua* revelator of the Jews foundational sacred texts, but including also Ezekiel, Daniel, Job, and Jeremiah. This reworking of the collective memory regarding such figures and the roles they played in the great transformative crises of Jewish history re-establishes the culture's great voices of old in a new

time, which Najman asserts is meant ultimately to transform the reader “from one full of despair and paralyzed by questions, into someone who is ready to receive the Torah once more and to renew the covenantal life of Israel” (67).

In chapter three, Najman analyzes *4 Ezra*'s use of Jewish scripture – more specifically, its use of the *memory* of scripture, which is intimated to have been destroyed (“burnt,” literally and/or figuratively) along with the Temple. She demonstrates that in contrast to the trend toward textualizing prophecy in the exilic and post-exilic periods by making the actual text, words, and scrolls of prophecy sacred objects in and of themselves, *4 Ezra* initially de-textualizes its prophecy, reflecting not so much the actual loss of scripture but the loss of scripture's authority in the broader Jewish world after the second destruction of the Temple. That is, Jewish scripture is nowhere quoted directly, but yet is clearly alluded to, though with a conspicuous reinterpretation. This new gloss effectively points away from the revealed authority of traditional scripture and towards the power of God to reveal anew, and the critical need for humans – Jews – to discern that new revelation. Only in this way can the scriptures be restored, but like the Second Temple, their memory now will always be marked by the destruction that preceded them.

Chapter four focuses on the role of transformed space in *4 Ezra*, particularly regarding the significance of the empty space (desert, wilderness) wherein the Weeping Woman of the Fourth Vision is transformed into “an established city,” the New Jerusalem (4 Ezra 9:38-10:27). In the wake of the destruction, only a location unsullied by the legacy of past human failings and corruption – that is, where there was “no work of man's building” (4 Ezra 10:54) – could render the pure space required for the resurrection of Jewish life post-70. In so doing, the text also connects several different but critical themes of extra-Biblical Jewish contemplation: the value of withdrawal to the desert in preparation for revelation, as found in various Qumran documents; wilderness as the appropriate place for the revelation of a new law upon which to build the foundations of a new city and society, as found in Philo's *De Decalogo*; and the association of the Heavenly Temple with the Garden of Eden, as found in *Jubilees*, Qumran, Talmudic commentary, and even other apocalypses. The effect of these three themes being brought together in the specific way they are in *4 Ezra* is to tie this moment of transformation to the two critical moments creation in Israelite tradition: the creation of humanity in the Garden of Eden and the creation of the People of Israel in the wilds surrounding Mount Sinai. “Withdrawal to the desert, then, becomes linked to the recovery of a past that is pure, holy, and linked to the original creation of the cosmos, which, according to Philo, was created in accordance with the law of nature” (107). And as such, it allows Jewish readers in the Diaspora to imagine not just finding a place in the world again, or a place in Jewish sacred time again, when the rhythm of Jewish ceremonial life has been silenced with the destruction of the Temple; it also allows Jews to contemplate finding their *moral* center again, individually and collectively, around the Law.

It is this moral recovery that creates a possible future for the Jewish people that Najman associates with Lear's “radical hope.” The fifth and final chapter lays out the new perspective on the future that the transformations of persona, scripture, and space/time that apocalyptic revelation in *4 Ezra* has wrought. Like a retreat to the desert, field, or wilderness, the clearing away of the old, failed artifice of the previous constructions (largely through the incisive dialogues with the *angelus interpretis* Uriel) severs the cultural attachment to the past and makes

renewal possible. On this point, Najman again invokes the trials of Job by referencing James Kugel's 2007 examination of the mishnaic concept of *tsidduk ha-din*, the acceptance of the justice of God's unfavorable decree (146). In the context of *4 Ezra*, *tsidduk ha-din* means that while Jewish life as it had existed has been terminated, God's justice remains constant, and thus a new, just world awaits the Jews once again. This process begins with the revelation of the old and new books of the Law to Ezra.

Najman's study is continuously thought-provoking and methodologically inventive, especially in its use of cultural theory tools, not only from Nietzsche and Lear, as mentioned, but also from Stanley Cavell and Walter Benjamin. This cross-disciplinary endeavor transcends the confines of historiography in order to assess *4 Ezra* as a quintessentially *human* text, literature that, while produced within a specific historical trauma, resonates with the experience of trauma across the millennia. Najman even goes so far to mark each chapter with a reproduction of painter Cy Twombly's *Roses* series, which, for her, exhibit "the very compassion, trauma, and beauty that Ezra was taught to comprehend by Zion, the mourning woman, and the angel Uriel" (vii-viii). Even her guiding metaphor of the "reboot," noted above, asks readers to playfully reimagine the relationship of *4 Ezra* to the scriptural traditions that preceded it. Thus she argues for the ability of a very contemporary, decidedly non-scholarly genre to lend scholarly insight into this ancient text. In essence, Najman asserts the necessity of recognizing passion, beauty, and even fun in Biblical texts – and also in biblical scholarship. To be sure, Najman's textual analysis is conscientiously careful and thorough, all the more so because the fine distinctions she is teasing out into broad conclusions are so subtle. She even admits that contemporary scholars like herself have "no way of knowing" if the intended readers of *4 Ezra* experienced a sense of distance from scripture, as she argues (93). Such an honest caveat may raise some red flags about just how empirical her approach is, and surely some scholars will believe she is reading too much into small and ambiguous portions of an extremely complicated work. Yet she reasserts her scholarly prerogative immediately thereafter, affirming the text's self-presentation as the fundamental basis of all analysis. To this end she musters a convincing array of textual evidence to make her case, supporting her reading with the extensive use of predecessors and contemporaries of the time of *4 Ezra*'s creation. Hence she succeeds admirably in helping contemporary readers of this apocalypse of destruction, loss, and mourning appreciate it as a piece quintessentially of its time, even as it transforms what came before it and after and speaks to readers even today.