

**LADY ZION WEEPS**  
LOCATING HOPE IN THE FACE OF DESTRUCTION

Aaron Decker

**ABSTRACT**

The use of feminine imagery to represent the city of Jerusalem is common in Second Temple Jewish literature. Comparing how this use is different across various texts can help us understand the image more deeply. This study provides an interpretation of the mourning woman in *4 Ezra* and the Bride of the Lamb in the Apocalypse of John to draw some conclusions about the attempt to find hope in God's action, despite the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the oppressive dominance of the Roman Empire.

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**INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>**

A somewhat surprising number of texts from the Second Temple period personify the city of Jerusalem as a woman. This was not a new development; the Hebrew scriptures use feminine metaphors for the city or its people often, particularly in the prophets.<sup>3</sup> What is unique to the Second Temple period is that masculine imagery tends to disappear, while the woman Jerusalem takes on more substance than previously.

There are several possible reasons for this shift to have taken place. One may be simple language. The words for “city” in Hebrew (עיר), Aramaic (מדינה or קריה), Greek (πολις) and Latin (*urbs*) are all grammatically feminine. This constant use of gendered pronouns for cities in all these cultures could have helped the metaphor develop organically.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more significant was the ubiquitous Roman imperialist symbolism depicting the strong, “masculine” victory of Rome over its weaker, “feminine” subjects. One example was the Roman coins minted in the twenty-five year period after the destruction of the Second temple depicting a woman sitting under a palm tree, weeping, with the caption “*Judea Capta*” or “*Judea Devicta*.”<sup>5</sup> These would have been a constant, physical reminder for Judean inhabitants of their subjection, using exactly the feminine imagery we are considering.

If the depiction of Jerusalem as a mourning woman was so pervasive, it stands to reason that this greater social narrative would have influenced more than only the widest brush-strokes in the literature of the time. Allowing several of these works to dialogue with one another could help us

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1 A version of this paper, was presented as partial fulfillment of coursework leading to the Ph.D. in Biblical Interpretation at Brite Divinity School.

2 The English text of *4 Ezra* quoted in this paper is that of Bruce M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra,” *In The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, edited by James H. Charlesworth, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 516–559. Latin quotations are derived from the edition by Robert L. Bensly, *The Fourth Book of Ezra: The Latin Version Edited from the MSS. TextsS 3/2*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895). When passages are cited from chapter seven, the verse numbers come from the longer text. The English text of scriptural passages in this paper comes from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

3 For example, Ezekiel 16, Jeremiah 6, Lamentations 1, and in a particularly problematic instance, Hosea 3.

4 Caryn A. Reeder, *Gendering War and Peace in the Gospel of Luke*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 166. The so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinacy has been shown to be very probably false. But a “weaker” version of the idea, where culture, thought, and language are all mutually-influencing, remains strongly supported by most linguists. Laura M. Ahearn, *Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*, 2nd Edition, Blackwell Primers in Anthropology 2, (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 91–93.

5 Hindy Najman, *Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future: An Analysis of 4 Ezra*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 139.

to understand the image and its cultural connotations more deeply. In this paper, I will provide an interpretation of the transformative vision of weeping Lady Zion in *4 Ezra*. In it, I will show that the divine presence in Jerusalem was at stake for the author's contemporaries, and that one of the goals of the book is to provide hope that God is not only still present with the community, but actively constructing future restoration.

Then, I will look at the famous vision of the New Jerusalem found near the end of the Apocalypse of John. This symbolic woman is very like the one in *4 Ezra*, and offers the same kind of transformative power. There is an important temporal difference, however, that makes the promise perhaps more tangible to the reader, and provides a sense of hope that emphatically defies the impossibilities created by Roman hegemony.

## *FOURTH EZRA*

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The best manuscripts of *4 Ezra* that we have today are of Latin provenance, with two chief, but similar, textual families. Other texts or fragments include Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, and Greek, as well as two paraphrases in Arabic.<sup>6</sup> The Latin frequently appears to depart from other versions in small details, and includes a number of indecipherable sections, but for the most part is considered reliable. Semiticisms throughout the text hint at a Hebrew *Vorlage* that is no longer extant.<sup>7</sup> In many Western versions, both ancient and modern, it is preceded by a two-chapter prologue and followed by a slightly longer appendix, referred to as *5 Ezra* and *6 Ezra*, respectively; both are considered later additions, particularly on account of their clearly Christian origin.<sup>8</sup>

The historical context of *4 Ezra* is provided, in part, by the book itself. In 3.1–2, the protagonist and narrator identifies himself as Ezra, the late sixth century BCE scribe and leader who, according to the now canonical book bearing his name, was directed by King Artaxerxes to re-establish the Jerusalem temple as part of the Persian tactic of allowing vassal societies to keep their cultural practices, intended to reduce rebellion and produce positive feelings toward their Persian overlords. *4 Ezra* places this character some thirty years after the beginning of the Babylonian exile, i.e. before the events of the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

This, however, is an anachronism. The details of the narrative show its authorship took place after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, not by the Babylonians, but rather at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE. It is, then, much like the book of Daniel, drawing an explicit comparison for its readers between the Babylonian powers and the aggressors contemporary with the author. Consequently, the book is thought to have been composed around 100 CE, which makes it ideal for comparison with much of the Christian canonical literature.

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6 Metzger, "Fourth Book of Ezra," 518–519.

7 Metzger, "Fourth Book of Ezra," 520.

8 These additions appear to be ignored in most scholarship on *4 Ezra*, nor will I be considering them in this paper.

The Roman-period situation in which *4 Ezra* was written was apt for comparison with the Babylonian exile six hundred years earlier. In the pre-exilic period, the temple was understood to be the physical location of God's manifestation on earth. Its loss was traumatic for the Hebrew community, because to them, it meant that God had departed from Judah. The vision at the beginning of the book of Ezekiel shows that departure, with an enthroned God roaming the Judean wilderness; Second Isaiah's hopeful message begins with God's return through the desert to Jerusalem. The loss of the second temple would doubtless have appeared to be a repeat of this divine loss.

In fact, the Roman attack on the temple was probably only the last sign confirming worries that had already been growing about the effectiveness of the second temple and God's willingness to inhabit it. During the Seleucid rule, Antiochus IV Epiphanes placed a statue of Zeus in the Jerusalem temple, defiling the space. Controversies over the Hasmonean and Herodian kings and the priesthood under their rule continued to inspire a lack of confidence in the temple cult. And while Herod the Great's work to expand and beautify the temple may have enhanced its reputation, there could have been no certainty for the populace that leadership and sacrificial activities there were legitimate.<sup>9</sup> That discomfort over God's presence or absence is a theme hiding in *4 Ezra* can be seen in one of Uriel's measurements of epochs, in verse 10.47. Here, while speaking about the vision of the woman we are about to explore, he explains the symbolic period where she was caring her young son as the "period of residence in Jerusalem." This is not the period of human residence, which would have extended many centuries earlier, but rather the period of divine residence in the temple.<sup>10</sup>

#### **THE FIRST PART OF 4 EZRA**

It is in this context that the reader sees Ezra in Babylon, thinking and praying over the destruction of Jerusalem and experiencing a series of divine encounters in response to his prayer. The book takes the form of seven episodes, each of which includes some form of revelation. These episodes, however, come in two obviously different sections—enough that earlier interpreters tended to search for source-critical ways to explain the difference. Today, most understand the book's authorship to be a unity (aside from the Christian prologue and appendix), and even if the authorship could be shown to be multiple, the book presents itself as a single document.<sup>11</sup>

In the first of these two sections, encompassing the first three episodes, the mode of revelation features Ezra in spoken dialogue with the angel Uriel. Each of these dialogues is instigated by a prayer of lament offered by Ezra, addressing the situation of Israel's subjugation to Babylon. Ezra argues that this situation is unjust, since Israel, while imperfect, has certainly been more righteous before God's law than its overlord nation. In each of his three prayers, Ezra relates his

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9 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 5.

10 Domingo Muñoz León, "El IV Esdras y el Targum Palestinense: Las cuatro últimas visiones (9,26–14,48)," *Estudios Bíblicos* 42 (1984): 10.

11 Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "Ezra's Vision of the Lady: The Form and Function of a Turning Point," in *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch: Reconstruction After the Fall*, edited by Matthias Henze and Gabriele Boccaccini, JSJSup 164, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 137f.

complaint to the history of salvation;<sup>12</sup> the first describes God's special relationship with the patriarchs of Israel, the second lifts up Israel's special status as a chosen and elected people, and the third puts all of humanity into the context of the Genesis 1 narrative of creation. In each of these instances, and throughout the rest of the book, the text of what has become canonical scripture is seldom quoted verbatim.<sup>13</sup> *4 Ezra* appears to locate the authority in the story, rather than the specific language of the biblical text.

What ensues between the angel and Ezra is a dialogue of sorts. Uriel responds to Ezra's prayer, and Ezra continues his questioning, sometimes offering what he sees to be evidence to contradict Uriel's view. The dialogue appears to go nowhere. Hindy Najman suggests that this is a battle between two roughly equal opponents, both offering fair points, and neither explicitly saying the other is incorrect.<sup>14</sup> Her observation is undermined simply by the status of the two conversation partners; one is a divine messenger with special insight into the otherworldly realm, and the other is a human scribe. Ezra is rewarded for his righteousness with progressively more privileged revelation (including explicit praise in 6.32, 7.104, 8.37), but he is never said to be on the same level as his dialogue partner. In fact, the conversation begins with a clear statement that Ezra's perception and understanding is quite limited (4.2).

A number of interpreters notice that the conversation between these two is reminiscent of the Hebrew scriptures' Job.<sup>15</sup> Like him, Ezra receives no satisfying answers to his expressed frustrations. In the biblical text, Job's friends are often thought of as poor helpmates, but James Kugel points out that their goal is probably not to provide comfort.<sup>16</sup> Instead, they are seeking to lead him toward a state of *צידוק הדין* (*tsidduq hadin*), the righteous acceptance of God's judgement *despite not understanding*.<sup>17</sup> This sounds rather like Ezra, who is invited to receive greater revelation in each episode, despite the fact that he does not fully understand what has already been shown to him.

### CONCLUDING EPISODE 3: LAMENT AFFIRMED

The fourth episode of *4 Ezra* is widely agreed to be the turning point of the book.<sup>18</sup> While some interpreters seek a specific moment of transformation,<sup>19</sup> Najman's argument that the entire episode should instead be considered as a whole is correct.<sup>20</sup> In fact, in her analysis, she pushes a

12 Edith McEwan Humphrey, *The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas*, LSTS 17, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 69.

13 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 24.

14 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 129.

15 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 127.

16 James L. Kugel, "Wisdom and the Anthological Temper," *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 24, quoted in Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 142.

17 This remains a part of modern Jewish practice in a prayer used at burial, intended to help the mourner accept the finality of God's judgement in human death. Zalman Goldstein, "The Jewish Burial," *Chabad.org*, Accessed December 4, 2024, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/368092/jewish/The-Burial.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/368092/jewish/The-Burial.htm).

18 Humphrey, *The Ladies*, 59.

19 For example, Humphrey, *The Ladies*, 62 says that interpreters Harnisch, Brandenburger and Collins all focus on the dialogue between Ezra and the woman in episode four, in preference over her transformation into the city of Zion.

20 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 132.

bit further, reaching into the end of the third episode for some of her evidence. In that section, Ezra battles with Uriel, expressing his real despair over the plight of humanity, and begging for God's mercy. Throughout this episode, while the angel is identified as the speaker (see 7.1), Uriel's responses are written as if it is God speaking in the first person. This is not the first time that the divine speaker's identity has been conflated, nor will it be the last; throughout the book, Uriel's speeches move from third to first person and back, as the messenger talks variously about or for God.<sup>21</sup> This creates a sense of intimacy and directness in these speeches.

In the third episode, then, it is God who proclaims to Ezra that his desire for mercy will not bear fruit—or at least, not as much fruit as Ezra wants. Ezra is ultimately told to stop this pleading (8.55), but not before God affirms two things for him. The first is a promise that salvation will take place, although not for many, and that God's focus will not be on punishing those who have sinned but on rewarding those who are righteous (8.38–39). For my understanding of *4 Ezra*, the affirmation that follows is more important. In verse 8.47a, God tells Ezra, “you come far short of being able to love my creation more than I love it.” This echoes something Uriel previously asked in the second episode: “Are you greatly disturbed in mind over Israel? Or do you love him more than his Maker does?” (5.33)

An important aspect of the transformation process, suggested by several scholars,<sup>22</sup> is the emotional affirmation that Ezra receives. His ability to lament over Israel's fate, and perhaps over humanity's fate, is praised, and even named as the reason he receives the vision of the woman in episode four (10.39). This, then, surely is part of Ezra's transformation. However, if it were the only factor in his transformation, there would be no need for the fourth episode—or rather, the fourth episode would not be a location of transformation, but only an additional revelatory experience, much like episodes 5–7.

#### **EPISODE 4: A NEW HOPE**

Episode four begins like those before it, with Ezra in prayer. His prayer is again a lament over Israel's captivity, rooted in the history of salvation—this time, the giving of the Law during the Exodus. This moment can be considered the constitutive event in the history of the Jewish people,<sup>23</sup> and its centrality draws the attention of the reader to Ezra's prayer. His words have a slightly different character than previously. Stone says, “the issues of the few and the many, or those of theodicy, are left behind. This is an indication of the further development of his thinking.”<sup>24</sup> Ezra has changed his focus, and is starting to accept God's judgement. But he is now considering the function of the Law. The author of *4 Ezra* clearly has a complex understanding of the Law and its function, and asks, in Ezra's voice, why humanity's heart is divorced from that Law.<sup>25</sup> Those who see a full change already having taken place in the protagonist are premature.

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21 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 127.

22 Richard Horsley and Patrick A. Tiller, *After Apocalyptic and Wisdom: Rethinking Texts in Context*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 140; Humphrey, *The Ladies*, 64. Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 153–154 includes this as an important part of Ezra's transformation, but also pushes beyond it.

23 Jacob Neusner, *A Short History of Judaism: Three Meals, Three Epochs*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 17

24 Michael Edward Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 308.

25 Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 308.

The vision that follows is an unexpected interruption.<sup>26</sup> This is not obvious; Ezra does seem to complete his prayer and look around him (9.38) before the image is revealed. Yet if it is not entirely an interruption for him, it is for the reader. In the first three episodes, we have heard Ezra pray and immediately receive a response from Uriel. We now should expect the same pattern. Instead, we are told that Ezra sees a woman in mourning. To emphasize this interruptive nature of the experience, Ezra says that his thoughts turn away from his lament in verse 9.39, and then repeats this in verse 10.5 after he has heard the woman's story.<sup>27</sup> This repetition, narrating Ezra's change in focus twice, strives to produce the same double-focus in the reader. We are prepared for more angelic dialogue, but something—it will turn out to be divine revelation of a new sort—disrupts the flow.

Ezra does not immediately recognize the woman as a revelatory vision, but assumes she is simply what she appears to be—a woman who, after a long period without children, has lost her only son on his wedding night.<sup>28</sup> Any attempts to allegorize her weeping or construe it as symbolic at this stage would be foolish.<sup>29</sup> This is the true and profound grief of a mother who has lost her beloved and long hoped-for child.

When Ezra finally responds to her story, it may seem that he is taking the same stand as Uriel in the previous dialogues.<sup>30</sup> Where the angel had answered his prayers unfeelingly and unhelpfully, so now Ezra is doing the same to the woman. The parallel is not perfect. Ezra does not answer her with questions or explanations reminiscent of Hebrew sapiential literature, as Uriel did for him. Instead, he insists that his lament is greater than hers. She is mourning only one child; he, however, has been occupied with the loss of all of Israel, and perhaps even the loss of all humanity. This quietly echoes Uriel's earlier messages about God's greater love for the objects of Ezra's despair. Perhaps the beginning of his transformation, as we have said, has begun to take place, as he points not toward his own loss, but toward Jerusalem, and indeed, to the whole earth.

Even so, he should be seen as slightly ridiculous by any feeling person, attempting to “one up” a grieving parent. As with Job and with Ezra previously, he is certainly not going to succeed in comforting her. We should instead imagine him trying to help her into a state of acceptance, despite her ability to understand.<sup>31</sup> This was indeed the place of Uriel earlier, and so the role reversal, while imperfect, is helpful in understanding the vision's meaning.

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26 Humphrey, *The Ladies*, 63.

27 The Latin wording of the two verses is similar but not exact. I have already made mention of *4 Ezra's* tendency not to quote scriptural texts directly. It seems reasonable to think it might not quote itself directly, either. Even so, we cannot be sure that a Hebrew *Vorlage* was not more exacting in its parallel. Whatever the case, the sentiment is the same, and draws the reader's attention.

28 Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 312.

29 For example, Bruce W. Longenecker, “Locating 4 Ezra: A Consideration of its Social Setting and Functions,” *JSJ* 28, no. 3 (1997): 286. “This woman is the externalisation of Ezra's inner turmoil, expressed throughout episodes I–III in order that he might internalise hope and healing.”

30 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 140.

31 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 141.

It is while Ezra is describing injustices against the city of Jerusalem that the woman's true identity is revealed.<sup>32</sup> She is Jerusalem itself—or rather, the eschatological city of Zion<sup>33</sup>. She is not shown to Ezra because his argument has won over either her or God. Rather, it is because he has named aloud the reality of the situation. Ezra sought to convince her that there were bigger things to grieve. The “bigger thing” he chose was the destruction of Jerusalem and its people. In her transformation, her mourning proves to be that very “bigger thing,” and is characterized as legitimate. Ezra's chastisement of her, in contrast, is shown to be foolish; she is distressed about the same thing he is.

Here we see the real power of the transformation in this episode. The woman encountered by Ezra persisted in her mourning, despite Ezra's argument that his grief was more profound. We have also heard Ezra persist in his own mourning, despite God's argument that “you come far short of being able to love my creation more than I love it.” (8.47a) This is the reality that God wants Ezra to understand—or rather, that the author of *4 Ezra* wants the reader to understand. But though he has been told this several times, it is not until Ezra has the *experience* of his encounter with weeping Lady Zion that he can begin to grasp it.

The experience continues with Uriel, behaving like an apocalyptic *angelus interpres* proper for the first time, providing an explanation of what Ezra has seen. After going into some detail about the specifics of her son and her grief, the messenger offers the reason Ezra has had the privilege of seeing “behind the curtain,” so to speak. “For now the Most High, seeing that you are sincerely grieved and profoundly distressed for her, has shown you the brightness of her glory, and the loveliness of her beauty.” (10.50)

In its way, this sense now spreads itself to the whole of the book. Ezra has been given the opportunity to engage in conversation with Uriel because, from the start, God has both heard and understood his prayer. Uriel's responses have moved from an assertion that Ezra does not understand, to an attempt to rationally explain, to a concession that his lament is appropriate. Now Ezra sees that God, too, shares in his lament, and indeed more deeply than he himself does.

Two important pieces remain to understand the fullness of Ezra's transformation in this episode. First is the invitation extended to Ezra in 10.55b. The scribe is told to go into the city, as long as his vision persists, to see its beauty and its size. Ezra is not, in fact, left only with a divine partner in his lament. He is shown proof that lament is not the end of the story. An otherworldly Zion awaits.

Or rather, is in preparation. In the first three episodes, Uriel has spoken several times about the eschatological timeline. While Ezra would like God to respond immediately to the destruction of

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32 While outside the argument of this paper, it is worth noting that it is not the loss of humanity, but only of Israel, that causes the true nature of Ezra's vision to be revealed. This is concomitant with what has come before, in Ezra's discussion with Uriel. It is the righteous in Israel who will be saved, and it is the destruction of Israel that should be lamented. When Ezra spoke of humanity as a whole, he was rebuffed.

33 The names “Jerusalem” and “Zion” are used interchangeably in *4 Ezra*. For the sake of clarity in this paper, I will separate them, using Jerusalem for the earthly city and Zion for the otherworldly hope. This is in no way meant to reflect an understanding endemic to Second Temple Judaism or any other period.



Jerusalem, Uriel has insisted that it cannot happen until some future moment.<sup>34</sup> It is no accident that the text describes this view of delayed eschatological time using the metaphor of a pregnant woman (4.40, 5.46, 5.49). Similarly, in the vision of Lady Zion, Ezra is shown that things are still in preparation. For all her grandeur, she is still not ready to be revealed on earth. Instead, she is “under construction.”<sup>35</sup>

### TRANSFORMATION

At the end of this episode, then, we do have a significant change in Ezra, but it is more than most readers expect. Horsley and Tiller believe that “The most compelling part of *4 Ezra* is the depth of Ezra’s despair at ever finding answers to his questions about evil and the sufferings of God’s people.”<sup>36</sup> Their ultimate conclusion is that *4 Ezra* is devoid of optimism and denies the possibility of successful revelation. But we are clearly meant to understand that Ezra does indeed receive information in episodes five and six, and that the scriptures given to him in episode seven are more than the texts that anyone might consider canonical. Most importantly, the promise of the eschatological restoration of Zion is certainly full of optimism for Ezra; it is the hope he has sought throughout.

Humphrey’s conclusion is better, but incomplete. She focuses on Ezra’s lament, noting that it is not “in opposition to the almighty,”<sup>37</sup> but in fact shared by the powers of heaven. Najman would adjust Humphrey’s conclusion slightly, asserting that Uriel fails to lament, and perhaps cannot; it is Ezra’s humanity, and God’s divinity, that make their shared lament possible.<sup>38</sup> Whether or not the angel can participate in this grief, the emotion surely is an important piece of the change we see here.

But Hindy Najman pushes further. For her, Ezra’s transformation is psychological, but not only. She focuses on the idea of *tsidduq hadin*, the acceptance of God’s judgment despite a failure to understand.<sup>39</sup> This acceptance helps to move the reader from a place of despair at the destruction brought on by the Romans, and toward the ability to receive the revelation of the Torah anew—just as Ezra does (more literally) in his seventh episode.<sup>40</sup>

All this is solid interpretation of the book’s message. But in my opinion, there is one more obvious move. Ezra is, finally, given a good look at a revelation of the promised Zion. His

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34 Ari Mermelstein, *Creation, Covenant, and the Beginnings of Judaism: Reconceiving Historical Time in the Second Temple Period*, JSJSup 168, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 168.

35 Humphrey, *The Ladies*, 59–60 notices this detail, one that most other sources appear to have bypassed. While Syriac, Ethiopic, and Arabic manuscripts describe Zion as a “built city,” the Latin has “city being built.” Metzger, “Fourth Book of Ezra,” 547. It seems much more likely to me that the longer and more complex Latin imperfect passive, *aedificabatur*, would lose its imperfective aspect in translation to other languages, than to gain it somehow in the Latin through the transmission process. It is likely, then, that the continuing action is closer to the original text.

36 Horsley, *After Apocalyptic*, 139.

37 Humphrey, *The Ladies*, 74.

38 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 131.

39 Najman, *Losing the Temple*, 154–154.

40 Najman, *Losing the Torah*, 24. In fact, in a creative and thoughtful observation, Najman suggests this may be why Ezra was selected as the protagonist of the book. He receives the Torah from God in this book. Then, in the canonical book of Nehemiah, chapter 8, he presents it to the gathered people of Israel. *Losing the Torah*, 17.

transformation does not, perhaps, depend on it, but it is supported and furthered by it. It is after this experience that the scribe takes on a new role, that of a prophet. He receives another two visions, a Moses-like experience of God speaking from a burning bush, and a considerable body of dictation from the divine—ninety-four books worth! Moreover, when his fellow Israelites speak to him, he now has hopeful answers to give them. (12.40–50, 14.27–36, in stark contrast to his brief encounter with Phaltiel in 5.16–19.)

All this is possible because, having seen it with his own eyes, Ezra knows that God is active in preparing a hopeful future—perhaps precisely because God shares in the people’s lament, even more greatly than they do. God might not be present *in* Jerusalem any longer, but God is certainly present *with* Jerusalem, and this presence will lead to a restoration that cannot be denied.

### *THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN*

Most scholars date the book of Revelation toward the end of the first century A.D., during the reign of Emperor Domitian, following the witness of Irenaeus.<sup>41</sup> Yet the context is quite different from that which gave us *4 Ezra*. John of Patmos here gives the interpreter a gift, naming both the location and the purpose for writing. The seven communities of faith addressed in chapters 2 and 3 are his audience, representing the early movement of Jesus followers in western Asia Minor. Laodicea was geographically closest to the historical Jerusalem, yet still distant, at a journey of about two weeks by camel or more than two months by foot.<sup>42</sup> It is likely, then, that the first people to hear John’s message knew of the Roman siege on Jerusalem and its temple; it is much less likely that they would have experienced this event in the same traumatic way as the readers of *4 Ezra*, however they understood their religious connection to the city.

The appearance of the New Jerusalem in the Johannine Apocalypse can hardly have been meant to provide (or realign) hope in the wake of that historical disaster. Rather, the invasion at hand was more cultural or ideological. The seven *ecclesia* of Revelation are measured for their fidelity to Jesus and the gospel message; most are found wanting. The book, then, serves a hortatory function, either calling for repentance—a return to the faith proper—or simply perseverance in the face of oppression.

This oppression, as I say, was more cultural rather than overtly physical. While it was once believed that Emperor Domitian was a cruel tyrant (as, for example, Suetonius portrays him), it now seems more likely that this was a caricature painted for purposes of later propaganda.<sup>43</sup> It is not, then, that soldiers were arresting Christians and leading them to slaughter—at least, not more than usual. Rather, it was the entire Roman system of life that Revelation addressed.<sup>44</sup> This

41 See for example, Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, NTL, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), or Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina 16, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 9

42 This, according to Google’s Gemini generative AI service, accessed on February 17, 2025.

43 Harrington, *Revelation*, 9–10.

44 A number of interpreters—Barbara R. Rossing and Greg Carey, for example—point us toward the economic life of the Roman Empire as the main locus of oppression. I agree, but would mention (as they, too, no doubt would) that there was probably much more about the empire—military/police violence, classism, slavery, etc.—that the

imperial culture is reflected in the character of Babylon found in the Apocalypse who, like Jerusalem, is anthropomorphized as a woman. She rather obviously stands in for Rome—and not only the city of Rome, but the entire empire. Revelation’s New Jerusalem is paired with her as a contrast, and in the space between the two lies a central message of the book.

### JERUSALEM WHO?

I have glanced over the identification of Lady Babylon and Rome rather quickly. The matter seems to be settled, at least among serious scholarship, with only a small number of readers seeing something more internal to the Jesus movement in the Babylon character instead.<sup>45</sup> Recognizing who is reflected in the New Jerusalem character, however, is more controversial.

It is traditional to link the New Jerusalem with the church—so traditional, in fact, that this interpretation appears in the sixth-century CE commentary written by Oecumenius, believed to be the first Greek commentary written on the Apocalypse,<sup>46</sup> as well as in the now-fragmentary fourth-century Latin commentary of Tyconius.<sup>47</sup> This link seems worth challenging; the late first century is a bit early, historically, to talk about some unified and institutionalized Church. But we can shift the premise slightly and see, if not some wider audience, then at least the seven communities of Jesus-followers in Asia Minor here. Are they the Bride of the Lamb?

Many modern interpreters appear to assume so. Pilchan Lee, for example, begins his discussion of the visions in chapters 19 and 21 by saying that the “important point here is that the New Jerusalem...is already actualized by the church in heaven.”<sup>48</sup> While he projects this community of faith forward into the eschaton, it is still that community he sees here. Similarly, Lynn Huber indicates that “The community...is embodied in the image of the lamb’s wife.”<sup>49</sup>

But in both cases—and in Oecumenius and Tyconius, in fact—little (if any) reason is given for this casting of roles. This suggests that, while there is a tendency for the reader to find himself<sup>50</sup>

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earliest Jesus followers would have found oppressive, and that John of Patmos would have been eager to criticize in his work against Rome.

45 These are reviewed in Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 9–11.

46 Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, trans. John N. Suggit, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 112, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 3, 159.

47 Tyconius, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, trans. Francis X. Gummerlock, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 134, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 172.

48 Pilchan Lee, *The New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation*, WUNT 2/129, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 267.

49 Lynn R. Huber, “Unveiling the Bride: Revelation 19.1–8 and Roman Social Discourse,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 175.

50 This pronoun is chosen purposefully here. The work of Tina Pippin highlights the misogynistic, and indeed gendered and sexually violent, portrayal of the feminine characters in Revelation. She is right in criticizing John’s utopian vision of liberation from empire as failing to liberate gender, noting that “The destruction of the past means the destruction of *all* the forces of oppression.” Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*, *Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 105. John’s expected audience is doubtless comprised mostly of men—or at the very least, John of Patmos is not thinking of how women might react to these characters as he writes them. Though the imagery is feminine, male readers doubtless see that imagery as pertaining to them, and perhaps even

in the character of the Bride of the Lamb, the identification is not made explicit by the author, but rather is only implicit and perceived. I suspect this is due to the function of the Bride specifically as city. With the Spirit, she calls for the reader to “come” (Rev. 22.17) and inhabit herself as the city. The faithful reader, then, begins as a guest to the wedding of the Lamb, and later imagines himself physically located inside the New Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup> The Bride is both the city *and* the community of its inhabitants—place and people alike.<sup>52</sup>

Nor is the community of faith the only inhabitant of this city. Lee’s exegesis of the New Jerusalem passage focuses on the detailed description of the city beginning in Revelation 21.9, comparing it to the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus.<sup>53</sup> Carsten Mumbauer, too, sees echoes of the Hebrew Bible, notably the Garden of Eden and especially the measurement of the temple and city in Ezekiel 40–48. In this, he concludes that the New Jerusalem is a city with “das Fehlen eines Gebäudes, das die Funktion des Tempels übernimmt, weil es dieses architektonischen Gebildes nicht mehr bedarf, da Gott selbst zum Tempel der Stadt wird.”<sup>54</sup> It is, then, the dwelling place of God’s own self amidst humanity.

Oddly, we have not spoken yet of the feminine image of the Bride. Nor do some interpreters—Lee devotes only two sentences to the female side of the image,<sup>55</sup> and Mumbauer ignores her altogether. Yet while that reading may seem shortsighted, it is consonant with the text itself. John introduces the Bride character in Revelation 17.7–9, but her human traits quickly disappear, and we are left with only the city. “It is clear that the author’s real interest is the city, and the bride image is necessitated only by the underlying mythic structure.”<sup>56</sup>

That mythic structure is, perhaps, the real answer to the identity of New Jerusalem. Revelation is an apocalypse, not an allegory. While the characters and images in the text may gesture toward the symbolic representation of a real world entity, any attempt to solidify that gesture into a determined signifier—historical or modern alike—is to do injustice to the text itself.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the Bride is woman *and* city, the dwelling place of the faithful *and* of God, all collapsed into one overloaded mythical symbol.

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exclusively them. David L. Barr, “Women in Myth and History: Deconstructing John’s Characterizations,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 55–68.

51 Rossing, *Choice*, 137–138.

52 Huber, “Unveiling,” 174.

53 Lee, *New Jerusalem*, 270ff.

54 Carsten Mumbauer, *Visionen von Gut und Böse: Studien zur Bildtheologie der Offenbarung des Johannes*, NTAbh 62, (Münster: Aschendorff, 2020), 219.

55 Lee, *New Jerusalem*, 270.

56 Barr, “Women in Myth,” 57.

57 This is a big part of the problem with many modern, dispensationalist readings of our text. The genius of apocalyptic lies, in part, in its ability to address both its own context and others far beyond. By narrowing the symbolic language of the text to single, clear, and often indisputable near-future identity makes, “Revelation into a sort of program for the latter days, [robbing] the book of any value or relevance for any other time.” Justo L. González, “Revelation: Clarity and Ambivalence, A Hispanic/Cuban American Perspective,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 50.

“The bride of the Lamb exists entirely as a transitional or liminal figure.”<sup>58</sup> She moves the reader from the experience of observing the destruction of Babylon to the experience of dwelling in the true holy city. This transition is a joyful one, taking place during the celebration of a wedding banquet.

### LADY ZION, LADY WISDOM

While the connections between Revelation and the writing prophets have long been clear, it is only more recently that the book’s use of wisdom literature has been foregrounded. Barbara Rossing shows that the Apocalypse clearly draws on an ancient literary trope offering a choice between two women, whose presence in the text reflects two sets of moral pathways, value systems, cultural identities, etc. They are often as imagined marital candidates for the male reader. In the Hebrew tradition, this image reaches at least back to the introductory chapters of Proverbs and the contrast between Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.<sup>59</sup> It continues in later examples of the wisdom tradition, including in the ideal woman portrayed in Qohelet 7.<sup>60</sup> The trope exists within the Greco-Roman world as well, appearing first within the Heracles tradition as told by Prodicus, and flourishing from there, found in a wide variety of texts and genres.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, then, Revelation presents us with a contrast between two women. The part of Lady Folly is taken up by Babylon, and the Bride of the Lamb characterizes the preferable Lady Wisdom. Like the pair found in older Hebrew and Greek/Latin traditions, the persuasive argument heavily involves the physical description of the two women. What may surprise the reader here is the seemingly-positive characterization of Babylon. She is beautiful, full of color, adorned with wealth. This contrasts with the portrayal of Folly in Proverbs 9.13, who is loud, stupid, and ignorant. Babylon is enticing, as are the rest of the actors on the side of the Roman Empire in the Apocalypse. “The beast from the sea is depicted as apparently having the fullness of power and of government. It is, therefore, not an unattractive beast.”<sup>62</sup> The Bride, too, is brilliant and beautiful, “adorned as a bride for her husband” (Rev. 21.2). Indeed, in Revelation 21, John (with the reader) is given a tour of her golden streets and shining jewels.

If we consider a choice between these two characters, then, the male gaze may struggle. Both women are deeply desirable, and it may be difficult to choose between them. The difference has little to do with their wealth or beauty, then. Instead, Greg Carey notices a significant gap between the two in the *form* of their beauty. The Bride, along with the Lamb and the forces of heaven surrounding them, are certainly bedecked in riches; this wealth, though, shines with brilliant, golden light. Babylon and those associated with the beast, on the other hand, are many-colored, with a focus on purple and scarlet.<sup>63</sup>

58 Huber, “Unveiling,” 173.

59 Rossing, *Choice*.

60 Goh, Elaine Wei-Fun, “Who Is ‘She’ in Ecclesiastes 7:26? An Alternative Reading against Cultural Biases,” in *Contextual Theology: Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Class*, ed. HiRho Y. Park and Cynthia A. Bond Hopson, (Nashville: The United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2020), 39-50.

61 Rossing, *Choice*, 17ff.

62 González, “Revelation,” 53.

63 Greg Carey, “A Man’s Choice: Wealth Imagery and the Two Cities of the Book of Revelation,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 152.

We might say, then, that Babylon, on her own, is a regal character, and appears alluring at first glance. But her royal purple gives way to blood red, revealing the insidious source of her wealth and power. The Bride, however, is clothed in light. The beauty, power, and wealth she carries is true and can be seen for what it really is—the splendor that reflects the Lamb of God.

The womanly side of this imagery, too, is very apropos to the Roman context in which it is set. Roman values centered on the family as the foundation and stronghold of Roman society and power. It is common to understand the Roman household as divided between two realms; the man ruled over the external world, doing business and moving in society, while the woman ruled over the internal world, managing the household economy and life. This was ideally understood more as a partnership (however unequal) entered into by choice, rather than a legal contract that may have been entered into by force.<sup>64</sup> Within this partnership, a woman's fidelity to her husband was of paramount importance, and even served as the basis of the mythological story of Lucretia, upon whose faithfulness the foundation of the Roman Republic depended.<sup>65</sup>

John's choice to portray Babylon as a promiscuous whore, then, reveals Rome as a failure according to its own measuring stick. Where faithfulness is everything, she is faithful to nothing. The New Jerusalem, on the contrary, is pictured as a bride, shining with perfect purity. She is the fulfillment of whatever Rome pretends to be.<sup>66</sup>

#### **YOU HAVE NO CHOICE**

In her examination of the two-women trope in Revelation, Rossing rightly concludes that, "Revelation's genius comes in transforming the two-women tradition out of the realm of wisdom and personal morals into the realm of political and economic critique."<sup>67</sup> The reader is not being encouraged to follow a particular moral path. Instead, readers are being invited to reject the whole imperial system in which they dwell and embrace a different social order instead.

Yet the reality of life in Roman Anatolia may not have made that choice viable. The Roman Empire was practically all-encompassing. It would have been as difficult then for a person to physically leave the geographical boundaries of Rome and set up an external commune as it is for people today to escape oppression, poverty, or violence in their homelands. Even if they could, where would they go? The remains of the Persian Empire, to the northeast of Anatolia, were doubtless no better, and that was a border Rome was eager to protect.<sup>68</sup>

Even if we take John to imagine a life lived physically within, but in resistance to, Rome—it is difficult to see what this would look like. As only one example, we can look to the third, black horse described in Revelation 6.5–6. It speaks of destruction through the economic system, specifically focusing on food. While wealth-focused sales like wine and oil are left to normal market forces, prices of staple goods such as wheat and barley are intentionally manipulated so

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64 Huber, "Unveiling," 167.

65 Huber, "Unveiling," 169.

66 Huber, "Unveiling," 176.

67 Rossing, *Choice*, 59.

68 González, "Revelation," 52.

that a common person could barely afford to survive.<sup>69</sup> This system is clearly abusive and contrary to the values John is encouraging, but it is difficult to imagine how one might opt out of this system without starving to death.<sup>70</sup>

In fact, Rossing herself points out the incompatibility of the two systems. Whereas most wisdom literature presents a choice-pair of women in parallel, the Apocalypse of John offers us Babylon and New Jerusalem in sequence. In order for the Bride to emerge, the Whore must first perish; the two cannot coexist.<sup>71</sup> The book, then, acknowledges this same problem; so long as the Roman Empire persists, the faithful reader cannot truly enter into John's vision.

This pushes us back to *4 Ezra*, which also proclaimed that a New Jerusalem could not appear in a place already occupied by Rome (4 Ezra 10.54).<sup>72</sup> Like Ezra, the visionary of the Johannine Apocalypse is invited on a tour of the transformed city. In *4 Ezra*, this invitation was offered but was not narrated. Ezra presumably gets to walk the streets of Lady Zion, seeing its sights and measuring its boundaries, but the reader does not. In Revelation, however, the reader is carried along for that journey, treated to details of the city's grand size, shining beauty, and welcoming gates.

We may also notice the time of the city's revelation. The new city of *4 Ezra* is being constructed, not yet ready to be revealed to all. Revelation 21.2, however, explicitly portrays the New Jerusalem as already "prepared." The Greek verb, ἡτοιμασμένην, is perfect in aspect, suggesting a completed action. For this fulfillment, there is no waiting; all things have been made ready now.

This already-present side of John's message has been the theme throughout the whole book. Revelation's main event seems to be the struggle between the beast and the forces of heaven. However, the visions begin not with preparations for battle, but with songs of praise for the already-victorious God in the throne room. The battle has been won even before it begins. Ezra proclaims a hope that is just around the corner, waiting for Rome's empire to end so that it can be fulfilled. John knows that the end is already being brought about by God, and that the promised transformation is inevitable through the power of the Lamb.<sup>73</sup>

Let us now see that transformation. The woman in the field, weeping for her dead son, is physically transformed into the city of Zion before Ezra's eyes. So too does John see the transformation of Jerusalem, though this transformation is more subtle. In Revelation 19, when the Bride first appears, she is described in terms of a woman; in chapter 21, she has become the

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69 González, "Revelation," 56.

70 A good response to this problem might push us to consider the dynamics of a different kind of community, a subculture, located within the empire. While one could construct a theology of this community from texts like Acts or James, it seems more difficult to find data for envisioning this community in the Apocalypse.

71 Rossing, *Choice*, 163.

72 This is not to suggest any kind of literary dependence of one of these documents on the other. Rather, they are probably drawing on similar imagery from within the tradition history of the culture, and their comparison is therefore worthwhile.

73 Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

city, with few feminine characteristics remaining. Rossing notes that the wedding of the Lamb is never narrated.<sup>74</sup> Yet we still experience it; the transformation of the bride, adorned for her husband, into the city is in fact her marriage feast, as those who are invited to the wedding banquet are also transformed into those who are invited into the city.

Like *4 Ezra*, then, the transformation of the woman into the city is the climax of the book. In Revelation, however, “it is not something future it unveils; it is something present it unmasks.”<sup>75</sup> The presence of Lady Zion is not just projected into the eschaton, but is made tangible for the reader. We have identified the city of New Jerusalem as both the dwelling place of the faithful and the dwelling place of God. Revelation proclaims that they have already converged—something that John could expect his readers to understand. After all, for them, those dwelling places have already converged in the person of Jesus, who “tabernacles” (σκηνώω, in Revelation 21.3 and John 1.14<sup>76</sup>) in their midst.

This reshapes the two-women thesis slightly. In the Hebrew wisdom tradition, and in the Greco-Roman culture, the trope of two contrasting women presents the reader with a choice. Revelation, however, reframes this not as a choice, but as a promise. A person living in late first-century Asia Minor would not have the freedom to choose. Rome is detestable, but there is no way out. This reader does not likely need to be convinced to reject Rome; he needs to be convinced that such a rejection is possible in the first place. John’s Apocalypse presents the reader with the promise that there is an alternative to the oppressive, violent, destructive life currently being experienced. It then reveals that the only sustainable existence dwells in the Lamb and the Bride. Babylon and the Beast, however indestructible and glorious they appear, are already at an end at God’s hand.

It may look like John gives an option between hope and despair, but there is no choice. In the Apocalypse of John, despair will perish, and hope is inevitable. This is not mere passive waiting on God’s action, nor is it advocacy of isolationist separatism. Despite the apparent persistence of empire, the community of God can actively resist Rome—because it is already dead. They can live as if their salvation has already come in their midst—because it has.

### *FINAL THOUGHTS*

The loss of the city of Jerusalem and its temple were certainly devastating to the people of God in the first century CE. Whether a nearby cataclysm, meaning loss of life and home, or a more distant symbol of the ever-present oppressive power of empire, hope would have been hard to find. There was something, though in the character of Second Temple Judaism that insisted on

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<sup>74</sup> Rossing, *Choice*, 144.

<sup>75</sup> Harry O. Maier, “Coming Out of Babylon: A First-World Reading of Revelation Among Immigrants,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>76</sup> This is not meant, in any way, to suggest that John the Evangelist and John of Patmos are one and the same. That old idea was been thoroughly discounted by modern scholarship long ago.



the proclamation of hope despite all evidence to the contrary. It was possible to find ways to assert God's fidelity, and moreover, presence, even when only absence was visible.

And we need that. There are many people who have the popular view that apocalyptic literature is destructive and terrible. This viewpoint limits the power of these texts. But apocalyptic does not want to tell us about the end of the world. It wants to proclaim hope when it seems the world is ending.

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