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THE COLLECTION OF SACRED BOOKS ACCORDING TO THE *FOURTH (THIRD) BOOK OF EZRA*

Key words: Ezra, sacred scriptures, canon

The *Third Book of Ezra*, named as such in the Macedonian Bible, but overall considered as the *Fourth Book of Ezra* (*Fourth Ezra* or 4 Ezra in the following text), records a large number of sacred books, admitting that only twenty-four have circulated publicly since Ezra's time. According to the text from 14:44-48, there were ninety four books, and Ezra was "to make public twenty-four books" that were written before his time, that is, offer them to everyone, and "to keep that seventy, that were written last" for the wise ones, as they contained understanding, knowledge and wisdom. This would be an astonishing note that witnesses a possible complete collection of sacred books in the time of Ezra, even though it could be slightly questioned, because of the book's relative lateness, considering that it was written probably around 120 A. D.

Some general notes about the Fourth Book of Ezra

To establish a proper background for this paper, a brief survey of some basic introductory matters concerning *Fourth Ezra* will be given. The conclusions regarding the name, original language, text and versions, date and provenance of the book reached in the subsequent outline, will be assumed in the following text.

A) The name issue

The nomenclature for the various books in the Ezra tradition reached no consensus until modern times. The books called after Ezra and Nehemiah provoke certain methodological difficulties, because there are significant distinctions in naming the books in various versions and editions of the Scriptures.

The numbering of the four books is according to the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Scripture, where the book of Nehemiah disappears and becomes the “Second Book of Ezra”. It is necessary to point out that only these two books are accepted as canonical by western Christianity. In the modern editions of the Scripture in the Western languages, the first book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah exist as Ezra (without title-numeration), and Nehemiah, respectively, like in the Hebrew edition. The other two are considered apocryphal writings.

The numbering and the order in the Greek translation of LXX (Septuagint) seem to be quite different. The “Second book of Ezra” is placed at the beginning of these books, and called “First Book of Ezra” (Εσδρας Α), likewise in the old Latin translations, and is therefore also known as “Esdrae Graecus” in the West. This means that it precedes the books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Nehemiah (“Second Ezra”) becomes “Third Book of Ezra”, while “Third Ezra” according to the Vulgate becomes “First Ezra”. However, the “Fourth Book of Ezra” does not appear in LXX, but it appears in Church-Slavonic and another Slavic Bibles (including the Macedonian one) as Third Ezdra, as shown in the table below.

The book has an apparent apocalyptic content and it is therefore also called “Apocalypse of Ezra”, or “Revelation of Ezra’s prophecies”. Some early Christian writers mentioned the book under the title “Prophet Ezra”.

B) Text, versions and acceptance of the book

The attempt to recover the original language of 4 Ezra has a long history. Most scholars assume that 4 Ezra was originally composed in a Semitic language, the text of which is lost, and translated into Greek, the text of which is also lost (Willett, 1989:52). The major texts of 4 Ezra are in Latin and Syriac language, the Latin version being considered the most important one. From the Latin version, the Church Slavonic version derives, and the text from it has also been translated into the Macedonian and into the Georgian Bible. In the Church Slavonic and Georgian translations it is placed at the end of the Old Testament, while in the Macedonian Bible it follows the Second Book of Ezra.

Other versions include Ethiopic, Armenian, and two independent Arabic versions. The ^{Ethiopian} Church considers *Fourth Ezra* to be ^{canonical} and calls it “Izra Sutuel”. In the Eastern Armenian tradition it is called “Third Ezra”. Roman Catholics do not consider it as a part of the deuterocanonical books, and Protestants also consider it as apocryphal.

Most Latin editions have a void of 70 verses (between 7.35 and 7.36), because they originate from an ancient manuscript (*Codex Sangermanensis*), wherefrom one page of the text is missing. In the end of the 19th century, a group of Bible scholars published a critical edition of the lost verses, and these have been inserted into the contemporary Stuttgart edition of Vulgate. The basis of all these translations can be reconstructed (of course, without absolute accuracy) from the Greek text of this book (Ѓорѓевски, 2017: 71-75).

Vulgate	Editions in modern languages	LXX	Church- -Slavonic language
First Ezra	Ezra	Second Ezra	First Ezra
Second Ezra	Nehemiah	(Third Ezra)	Nehemiah
Third Ezra	First Ezra	First Ezra	Second Ezra
Fourth Ezra	Second Ezra	-	Third Ezra

C) The origin of the text

Fourth Ezra is a Jewish work written probably soon after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, but the literary context places the events in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The text of the book is typical for the writings of the time of the Second Temple (517 BC to 70 BC, Willett, 1989: 51).

The main character is Ezra the Scribe. In several places in the book, he is mentioned as its writer (1,1; 2,33,42). Biblical scholars raise the question on whether the book has one or more writers. While some suppose that the book is a work of almost five authors, others, perceiving the literary unity of the book, claim that it is a work by only one author (perhaps the same of the apocryphal Revelation on Baruch).

Regarding its place of origin, the assumptions go from Palestine, through Alexandria, to Rome.¹

D) Content

The Fourth book of Ezra has sixteen chapters and is divided into seven episodes, traditionally referred to as visions (but in fact only three of them

take the form of symbolic visions followed by interpretations, Hogan, 2008:1). The first vision occurs in Babylon. Ezra asks God: “how can Israel be in trouble if He is righteous?”. The question is answered by the archangel Uriel, sent by God, who points out that the human mind cannot know God’s ways, and announces that the end will come soon, so that God’s righteousness can be revealed. In another vision, Ezra asks why Israel is handed over to the Babylonians, but this is explained away by the humans’ inability to understand, and the approaching end. In the third vision Ezra asks about the reason why Israel does not possess the world. Uriel replies that the current condition is transitory, which is followed by a description of the destiny of the righteous and the destiny of the wicked. Ezra tries to address the condemned, but it is said that no one can escape one’s destiny.

The next three visions are of a more symbolic nature. The fourth vision is about a grief-stricken woman who is transformed into Zion. Ezra encounters a woman lamenting the loss of her only son, who died right after his wedding. Ezra disapproves of the woman’s bereavement, for it is grief for merely one child, while all of Israel laments the mother, Zion, destroyed by the Romans. The woman transforms into a majestic city while talking to Ezra, a feature that Uriel sees as a restored Zion

¹ The major suggestions for the place of composition are Rome and Palestine. The references to Babylon (especially in 3,1), have often been understood as cryptic references to Rome (see Willett, 1989: 52).

(far superior to the temple of Jerusalem). The fifth vision refers to an eagle with three heads and twenty wings, and a lion; the former is rebuked by the latter and then burnt. The interpretation of this vision is that the eagle designates the fourth kingdom from the vision of the prophet Daniel; its wings and heads representing the rulers. The last scene constitutes the triumph of the Messiah above that kingdom. In the sixth vision, a man who represents the Messiah, blazes fire upon those who attack him. The final episode, often referred to as “the epilogue”, consists of a narrative of Ezra’s restoration of the Scriptures, along with the dictation of seventy secret books, and ends with his translation to heaven. God appeals to Ezra and commands him to establish the Law. Ezra gathers five scribes and begins to dictate, and after forty days he manages to write ninety-four books: twenty-four holy books and another seventy secret books. Following the description of the visions, the last two chapters contain admonitions for sinners and warnings about wars.

The Sacred Collection of ninety four books

According to the text of 4 Ezra 14, God had revealed his truth to Moses on Mount Sinai, including the Law published openly, and the secrets of the times which were not to be revealed, but the Law had been burned and the secrets lost. At God’s command, Ezra assembles five scribes to whom he dictates as God gives him “the lamp of understanding” (14:25) for forty days, during which time he writes ninety-four books (West, 1981:470).

“And on the next day, behold, a voice called me... And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know. They sat forty days, and wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night... So during the forty days ninety-four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, ‘Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.’ And I did so.” (14, 38.41-42. 44-48).

A) Moses and Ezra

Here Ezra is depicted as a new Moses, summoned by a voice from a bush (14:1), and then inspired to dictate the book. The total of forty days of fasting in the previous six episodes is balanced out by Ezra’s forty-day fast during the writing of the ninety-four books in the epilogue (14:42–44), recalling Moses’ forty day fast during the rewriting of the tablets of the law (Exod 34:28).² As Stone (1990: 41) comments, “the association with Moses is very clear”. Scholars cite rabbinic passages that show that Ezra was deemed worthy to receive the Torah in the same measure as Moses (Stone, 1990:

² The forty-day fast in the epilogue may be meant to draw an analogy between the re-inscription of the commandments on the second set of stone tablets after Moses destroyed the first set (Exod 32:19; Deut 9:17), and Ezra’s inspired dictation of the ninety-four books, after the Babylonians burned the “law” (4 Ezra 14:21–22), Hogan, 2008: 5; 206.

411). The revelation that Ezra receives, however, is much more extensive than the Torah of Moses, because there are another seventy esoteric books, which are reserved for the wise among the people. Ezra is instructed to keep this knowledge secret (14:8, 46).³ The apocryphal Ezra takes over the role of lawgiver and revealer, and his role is by no means identical to that of Moses and of the biblical Ezra (Collins, 2013: 91). Moses is clearly invoked here with all of the associated Sinaitic and revelatory experience.⁴ In Nehemiah 8, Ezra also presents the Torah of Moses to the people. What is distinctive about the version in 4 Ezra, however, is that Ezra must literally rewrite scripture and also that the scripture is bipartite: it contains an exoteric component for the many, and an esoteric component for the few, a fact that is repeated for emphasis (Najman, 2014: 150). The text of 4Ezra carefully appropriates both the authority of Moses as a figure, and the Mosaic authority of the text as an essential fulfilment of Ezra's call to recover the fractured or lost Torah (Najman, 2013: 113).

Moses and Ezra will continue to be compared in subsequent rabbinic traditions as well.⁵

³ The similarity of these illustrations to the figure of the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness, who is said to have gained knowledge of the secrets of history (1QpHab II, 7–10; VII, 3–5), is notable, see Dimant, 2013: 36.

⁴ The role played by Ezra does not differ from that which the book of *Jubilees* assigns to Moses, who received not only the “first Torah” (Jub 6:22) on Mount Sinai, but also other written records of the heavenly tablets (1:26), Boccaccini, 2013: 78.

⁵ For example, in the *Tosephta Sanhedrin* 4:5 it reads on Ezra: “Rabbi Yossi said: Ezra was sufficiently worthy that the Torah could have been given through him if Moses had not preceded him.”

B) Twenty-four books for “the worthy and unworthy” and seventy books for “the wise”

What are the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Scriptures (which need to be restored because they were burned in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, according to 14:21–22; cf. 4:23), and the seventy additional books that contain “the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge” (14:47)?⁶ What is the relationship between these two sets of books? Do the books for “the wise” supplement the books for “the worthy and unworthy” by dealing with additional matters? Do they interpret these books by setting them in their proper context? Or do they negate them, by, for example, teaching that only a few will be saved, a doctrine to be kept from the many in need of consolation? As very little is said about the books' contents, it is impossible to say (Najman, 2013:151).

The twenty-four books that are to be published openly are obviously those of canonical scripture (and may well be identical with the twenty-two books mentioned also by Josephus), but the identity of the seventy books is impossible to determine, and they are presumably the apocalyptic writ-

⁶ This characterization of the seventy secret books in turn recalls Ben Sira's comparison of the Torah to a series of rivers, overflowing with “wisdom”, “understanding”, and “instruction” (Sir 24:25–27). Ben Sira describes his own role as a wisdom teacher and interpreter of the Torah “like a canal from a river, like a water channel into a garden” (24:30), and later adds, significantly, “I will again pour out teaching like prophecy . . .” (24:33), see Hogan, 2008: 216.

ings to which 4 Ezra itself belongs.⁷ Some scholars consider the seventy books to refer to LXX, or the lost books mentioned in other canonical books of the Scriptures. Others assume that these seventy books are the Torah she-be'al peh of rabbinic Judaism, the revealed tradition in whose context alone may the written Torah be properly interpreted (See Longenecker, 1997: 271–293).⁸ Certainly there is a connection, because rabbinic Judaism could be seen as one development of the idea of a divinely revealed interpretive tradition that supplements scripture (Blidstein, 1973: 496–498). In some midrashim, Torah she-b'al peh is described as a mysterion, a secret revealed only to Israel (Najman, 2013: 151–152). It is also true that the seventy books are closely related to the supplementary esoteric traditions mentioned in the Enochic literature and in the Jubilees (see Mroczek, 2012).

It is possible, however, that no specific lists of books are intended. The numbers may be of symbolic significance. Thus, twenty-four (or twenty-two) is the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, while seventy is the number of the nations and languages of the world (Gen 10–11), the number of souls who went down to Egypt (Gen 46:27), and the number of elders chosen by Moses (Num 11:16–30). If twenty-four represents the minimal number of units with which every meaningful utterance may be formed, then seventy represents

the totality of the world (Najman, 2013: 152). The number seventy used in this connection might even be more subtle in its reference than this. The word “secret” (*swd*), which occurs several times in this context, in Hebrew has a numerical value of “seventy” (s=60, w=6, d=4), a factor which may have influenced the writer’s use of this particular number (Russell, 1987: 109–110).

In any case, whether it is included in the seventy or not, *Fourth Ezra* is itself surely an esoteric work, “... in the sense that it is intended for a restricted audience in the author’s own time” (Hogan, 2008: 227).

C) Josephus and the Sacred Collection

The first collection of twenty-four books may well be identical with the twenty-two books mentioned by Josephus Flavius⁹ in his work *Against Apion*.

“Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but two and twenty, and contain the record of all time. . . . We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own scriptures. For although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as decrees of God,

⁷ For West, “the esoteric works include, probably mostly, the growing number of apocalypses; and their treatment here illustrates the meaning of the term ‘apocrypha’ which properly belongs to them” (West, 1981: 470).

⁸ For Ginzberg’s interpretation of the seventy books as referring to the Oral Torah see his *The Legends of the Jews* (Ginzberg, 1928: 6, 446); see also Stone, 1990: 441, n. 22.

⁹ Whether it is also probable that Josephus’ count was artificially reduced to twenty-two to match the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, it is not so clear. It is possible that “the difference is accounted for by assuming that Josephus combines Ruth with Judges, Lamentations with Jeremiah, and takes Ezra and Nehemiah as one book, while 4 Ezra probably regards Ruth and Lamentations as separate books” (Bentzen, 1952: 26).

to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them” (1.37- 43).

Josephus also mentions that the Sadducees relied mainly on the written records of the Torah of Moses (*Ant.* 13.297), while the Pharisees observed “[oral] traditions from their fathers that are not written in the Law of Moses” (*Ant.* 13.297). The Essenes, as the Dead Sea Scrolls have made apparent, were the only group in Second Temple Judaism to have additional “books of their own” (*J.W.* 2.142, Boccaccini, 2013: 78). However, no ancient Jewish source that mentions a twenty-two book set of scriptures actually lists the names of those books.

Is the notion of twenty-four books in 4 Ezra supported by the testimony of twenty-two books mentioned by Josephus, which, as some ascertain, could prove the existence of a closed collection of sacred books in that time? There are different opinions. Some scholars think that Josephus’ twenty-two book collection was not formed in Judaism, but rather that it was the twenty-four book canon that was popular and in circulation in Josephus’ time (see 4 Ezra 14:44-48). Another observation is that Josephus was given to exaggeration, and therefore the reliability of his comments on the extent of one closed collection at the end of the first century CE can be questioned (McDonald, 1996: 109). There is also an observation that the aforementioned passage was written in an apologetic context, not only against Apion, but also against all those who denied the antiquity of the Jews and their sacred literature. Josephus, therefore, insists on the accuracy of the Hebrew Scriptures as reliable history, and not as sacred Scripture (Leiman,

1989: 51-52). Josephus’ comment that “no one has ventured to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable” could be simply without justification, since “it is inconceivable that Josephus was unaware of the wide range of textual divergence that characterized the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic versions of Scripture current in first century Palestine” (McDonald, 1996: 110; Leiman, 1989: 52). Assuming this aspect, Josephus need not be taken literally (Leiman, 1989: 52-53). Others are even more critical of Josephus’ reliability in this matter because of his exaggerations in the defence of Judaism—which is, of course, the context of *Against Apion*, and therefore conclude that “he is far from infallible” in regard to the shape of the biblical canon. Maybe Josephus is quite reliable in matters of topography and geography of the land of Israel and also in matters of economics, but in their opinion he is nonetheless very subjective in regard to the defence of Judaism against the pagan intellectuals of his day (see Feldman, 1989, 43-47). There are commentators who claim that Josephus’ twenty-two book canon “revealed his wish rather than the actual state of affairs regarding the biblical canon in his day”, observing that there were many such texts circulating in that time with a claim to canonical authority (Silver, 1990: 134; 4 Ezra 14:44-48 is one such example).

However, although acknowledging that Josephus frequently exaggerated in his writings, many scholars still believe that he did present a standardized collection of sacred books that could be verified (McDonald, 1996: 110). They reason that, “even if one allows for exaggeration on Josephus’ part, he could hardly lie about the extent or antiq-

uity of the canon; any Roman reader could inquire of the nearest Jew and test the veracity of Josephus' statement" (Leiman, 1989: 54). But, this argumentation assumes that all Jews everywhere would agree on the matter, which is the opposite of what we find in the rabbinic writings—the only writings that discuss the matter (see McDonald, 1996: 111).

Such an account is also seen in the Talmud (BT, B.B. 14,b) and in the *Midrash Rabbah* on Numbers (MR, Num. 14.4,15.22, Newman, 1976: 345). The *Midrash Rabbah* on Numbers associates the twenty-four books with the twenty-four priestly divisions (MR, Num. 15.22). Some commentators, for instance, believe that the twenty-two book count is the older option (Eissfeldt, 1965: 569). Another, rather peculiar numbering of twenty-seven, is found in an eleventh-century Greek manuscript containing the Didache and 2 Clement (Audet, 1950, 135-154). The books of the Old Testament are here given in Greek, together with a transliterated name for each, some from Hebrew and some from Aramaic (Newman, 1976: 345). The experts argue that the list is at least as old as the first half of the second century and probably as old as

the last half of the first century CE. If so, it could receive consideration along with Josephus and 4 Ezra - "it appears that a general consensus already existed regarding the extent of the category called Scripture", so that even the author of 4 Ezra was obliged to recognize this consensus in his distinction between public and hidden Scripture (Newman, 1976: 349).

At the end, there is no doubt that collecting the Hebrew sacred books represents a process, not an event. In the final analysis, it is the Jewish community, not some person or elite, which determines canonicity, since for a book to become a part of a collection of sacred books, it must be accepted by the community as authoritative (Cohen, 2006, 184). Nevertheless, the quotations from 4 Ezra, the writing of the first century, provide evidence of the recognition given at that time to quite a special collection of Jewish Scriptures.

This text was intended to shed some light on the collection of the sacred book according to the *Fourth Book of Ezra*, and by no means to offer definitive answers to the many questions surrounding the problem.

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Збирката на свети книги според *Четвртијата (јуретјата) книга Езра* (Резиме)

Во овој текст накратко се разгледува проблемот на големиот број на споменати книги во *Третијата книга Езра* според македонското издание на Библијата, попозната како *Четвртија книга Езра*, и сметана за псевдоепиграфско дело во светската библистика. Во книгата се пренесува важна белешка за постоењето на оформена збирка на свештени книги веќе во петтиот век пред нашата ера. Во оваа статија е посочена значајноста на фактот дека во книгата се признава дека само дваесет и четири свети книги биле во јавен оптек од времето на Езра. Според ова сведоштво, Езра, свештеникот и обновител на верата и побожноста на Израил по враќањето од Вавилонското ропство, требало да „ги направи јавни дваесет и четирите книги“ што биле напишани пред неговото време, и да „ги задржи оние седумдесет, што биле напишани последни“ (14:44-48). Во текстот се разгледува можноста според која споменатите дваесет и четири книги соодветствуваат со дваесет и двете книги споменати од страна на Јосиф Флавиј (*Против Ајион*, I.8), но се нотира дека е невозможно да се определи идентитетот на останатите седумдесет книги. Се претпоставува дека тие би требало да бидат тесно поврзани со езотеричките традиции споменати во апокрифната литература (*Енох* и книгата *Јубилеи*), но се разгледува и можноста дека воопшто немало посебна намера во врска со специфичниот број на книги, односно дека споменатите броеви имале само симболичка вредност.

Клучни зборови: Езра, свети книги, канон