

BOOK DESCRIPTION

THE APOCALYPSE OF EZRA

Translation with Commentary and Introduction

by

Jacob Licht*

The Dorot (Generations) series, published by Mosad Bialik, has as its aim the presentation of works of Jewish literature and thought from the period of the Second Temple up to the time of the rebirth of the Hebrew language, with contemporary commentary and explanation. It contains, at present, some thirty volumes, many edited by the chief Israeli authorities on their respective topics.

Jacob Licht is well known to scholars and students of Jewish literature and thought in the period of the Second Temple. Most widely read among his works are his excellent commentaries on two of the Dead Sea Scrolls; *The Thanksgiving Scroll* was published in 1957 and *The Scroll of the Rule* in 1965. But he has composed other works dealing with diverse aspects of Jewish thought and literature during the Second Commonwealth. This new translation of the Apocalypse of Ezra (4 Ezra) therefore represents a labour carried out by an expert.

It is perhaps appropriate that Licht has chosen to devote his energies to this particular book, for it is unrivalled in its age for the vigour and profundity of its thought. It has, as he points out in his Introduction, already had three translations into Hebrew, each characterised by various problems arising from the period in which the translation was made and the context for which it was created. The most widely known is doubtless Abraham Kahana's rendering in his two-volume edition of *Ha-Sefarim ha-Chitzonim (The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha)*. As is well known, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were not preserved in Hebrew; indeed, a number of them were not originally written in that language. Kahana's edition is, as it were, the Hebrew "Charles",¹ an attempt to provide a sound translation from the Latin, with introduction and commentaries. His translation of 4 Ezra is into a biblical style, with the deliberate aim of tracing in the

* Jerusalem, Mosad Bialik, 1968, Dorot Library no. 6.

Hebrew Title: ספר חזון עזרא. תרגום, פירוש וצירוף מבוא יעקב ליכט

¹ cf. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, edited by R. H. Charles, 2 vols., Oxford, 1913.

Latin version, and reproducing in the Hebrew, not only the linguistic features typical of biblical Hebrew but also as many allusions to and expressions drawn from the Hebrew Bible as possible.

Licht is very conscious of the problems of making a modern Hebrew rendition of a book which was presumably originally written in Hebrew. First there is the general question – retroversion or translation. This is, in itself, a complex issue as will be seen below. Licht’s judgment is completely sound when he writes:

“In this translation of mine . . . there is no attempt at the restoration of the original, . . . but I attempted to remain faithful to the spirit of the book from the point of view of content and from that of style as it can be perceived through the curtains of the (ancient) versions”.

(p. 15)

In other words, he has prepared a translation in the general spirit of the Hebrew of the period: he did not attempt to restore the Hebrew original of the book.

In this undertaking Licht has one great advantage over almost all previous translators of the book into Hebrew, an intimate knowledge of the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, that is to say, of the literary Hebrew of the general period in which the Apocalypse of Ezra was written. In this reviewer’s opinion, he has produced a Hebrew version of the book which is clear, pleasant to read, and free from the artificialities of style which typify the versions of Kaminka and Kahana.

A second dimension of the translation of this particular book is the question of what version should be rendered. The Apocalypse of Ezra is not preserved in its (presumably) Hebrew original. Incidentally, as is natural for an Introduction in a series of this type, Licht does not even indicate that there have been other views put forth: the old view of a Greek original has now been abandoned, but there have been recent claimants (notably L. Gry, in his strange and largely unbased theories) for an Aramaic original. Licht assumes a Hebrew one, in our view quite correctly.

The Greek translation from this Hebrew original has also been almost completely lost. Some quotations are preserved, mainly in Clement of Alexandria’s writings, and this Greek version was utilised by the authors of two Byzantine Christian Apocalypses written in Greek, the so-called *Greek Apocalypse of Esdras* and the *Apocalypse of Sedrach*. Recently a part of a modern Greek version of the Eagle Vision from the Apocalypse of Ezra (ch. xiii) has been found in a Greek manuscript in Jerusalem. It has not yet been published, nor has it been determined whether this was a translation from Latin or else a “modernisation” of a section of the lost Greek translation.

In spite of its disappearance in the Greek Church, the book was remarkably popular in other Churches, oriental and western alike. This is witnessed by the existence of the work in many church languages: Latin,

Syriac, Ethiopic, Arabic (two complete versions and some fragments of others), Armenian, Georgian and Coptic (fragmentary). This multiplicity of versions is something of an *embarras de richesses* for the would-be translator. Licht characterises the situation as follows:

“The versions reckoned to be closest to the original are the Latin and the Syriac. This is my impression, too, but perhaps further investigation of the Ethiopic, Armenian and Georgian – if carried out by experts in these languages having access to numerous manuscripts – will force us to change this evaluation.” (p. 14)

He observes, quite correctly, that it is virtually impossible to reach a systematic restitution of the original, Greek or Hebrew, by means of a comparison of these versions. It is a labour of Tantalus, for after the comparison of all the versions, all too often no decision can be made between the alternatives offered. Licht describes his own procedure and says:

“My original intention was to make a free translation of the book, but in the end I found myself staying close, usually, to the formulation of the two chief witnesses, Latin and Syriac . . . In problematic verses I consulted the Ethiopic too, or else added a word for clarification.” (p. 15)

In order to enable the reader to find out, at least in a very elementary fashion, what is in these three versions at significant points, he has added a sort of critical apparatus giving Hebrew renderings of their chief variants. It is rather a pity that he did not make more systematic recourse to the Ethiopic and Georgian versions.² The evaluation of the Arabic versions, and of the Armenian translation are quite rightly outside the range of a work of this sort and the translator has properly excluded them from his realm of interest. While it is, therefore, difficult to quarrel with Licht's general method, in view both of the problematics of the transmission of the book, and of the format of the series for which he was writing, it is to be wondered whether a somewhat broader consultation of the versions other than Latin and Syriac might not have provided his translation with an even more solid base in the textual traditions of the book.

On the whole, however, one may conclude that the translation is a most satisfactory one. In good, readable language and with a fine sensitivity for the style and the nuancing of the thought, it presents the Apocalypse of Ezra to the popular and semi-learned Hebrew-reading public. But the importance of the book extends beyond this. Not only is it true that every translation is perforce an interpretation, but this is an interpretation by a man who is sensitive to and aware of the chief issues of concern to Jewish reli-

² Robert Blake showed very clearly in his publication of the Georgian version that Latin and Syriac form one textual family over against which one can isolate another constituted by Georgian and Ethiopic (HTR 19 (1926), pp. 308-314).

gious thought of this period, a man whose commentary on the *Hodavot* and his other writings have shown him to be a perspicacious analyst of patterns and structures of religious thought.

This leads us to consider the Introduction and notes (they are so brief that one hesitates to call them commentary). The Introduction suffers from being too short. The author has some most interesting things to say, but chooses (or is obliged by editorial fiat) to say them in far too laconic a fashion. What he attempts to do in fifteen pages is remarkable: he delivers himself of statements on the relationship between the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and the Canon, on the inclusion and exclusion of books, on the implications of the cessation of prophecy, on the origins of apocalyptic – its characterisation and its development, on the nature of Jewish eschatology, and more. These statements are usually perceptive, often very interesting, sometimes controversial, and always too brief.

This unfortunate situation is rendered the more acute by the fact that there is no good treatment in Hebrew of many of these problems, and so anything written on them takes on an especial importance. Thus, for example, Licht's suggestion as to the reason for pseudepigraphy is a fairly common one, namely that the view was regnant that only books which had been written in the era of prophecy were authoritative. Therefore, Licht explains, the author of 4 Ezra and other apocalyptic authors wrote under the names of ancient seers, as a means of gaining authority for their claims. One loses the thread of the argument, however, when he continues:

“Indeed this concealment (i. e. the pseudepigraphy) was merely a rather transparent falsehood, and today's reader is likely to conclude from it that the morals of the writers were lacking and the intelligence of their readers asleep. In fact, this lie was simply a convenient way, discovered by burning faith, out of a slight embarrassment.” (p. 8)

And, he goes on to say, the authors thus could express their profound convictions, while some readers took things at face value and some did not.

This stance raises a number of difficulties, for if it was generally accepted that the spirit of prophecy was no longer at work, then what did these authors think they were doing? We know that some writers of the time who claimed inspiration did not write pseudonymously (e. g. the author of the Habakkuk Commentary). Why then did the apocalypticists do so? Was it because their message was so urgent and their conviction of urgency served, in their own minds, to justify their means? This may be true of an eschatological apocalypse like 4 Ezra, but how about a book like the Greek Apocalypse of Baruch? There is nothing in it of the eschatological tension that characterises 4 Ezra, Daniel or 2 Baruch. There are, moreover, pseudepigrapha belonging to quite different literary genres, and not only apocalypses.

Now, the brief discussion here is not intended to deny importance to Licht's work, which is, on the contrary, very perceptive indeed. Moreover, I have no doubt that Licht himself is aware of these difficulties, and many others, and that a full presentation of his views would in fact preempt most of my comments. I just regret that he did not give it to us.

It was delightful to find his recognition of the problems raised by the dynamics of the dialogue between the seer and the angel. The first three visions of 4 Ezra are a profound discussion, perhaps the profoundest discussion in our literature from this period, of the question of divine justice in relationship to the world, man and Israel. It is a discussion written out of the anguish arising from contemplation of the destruction of the Temple, and the dialogue is presented as taking place between Ezra and an angel.

As Licht has discerned, and he is one of the first to do so in writing, there is something strange about the discussion. It might be put as follows: Ezra, who raises the problems, is penetrating, pertinent and persistent; the angel who answers his queries is none of these. Indeed, not only are his answers often pat, sometimes irrelevant, but on occasion they are plain evasive. Now, this would be all very well in a live discussion, but the Apocalypse of Ezra is a work of literature and, as has been shown,³ a rather sophisticated piece of literature. Harnisch, in his recent study,⁴ following E. Brandenberger, suggests a novel but unconvincing twist – the author's point of view is not represented by the seer, as has always been assumed, but by the angel. The book is a polemic against scepticism arising from the consideration of the destruction. The nature of the argumentation of the angel indicated here would then, according to Harnisch's view, make the author a better propagandist for the sceptics than for the faithful.

This problem is an almost insoluble one and is perhaps at the heart of what the book is about. On the face of it, the resolution of all the questions is in revelation. The first three visions each end in a small revelation of the signs which will precede the end. The last three visions are all apocalyptic revelations in the "classical" sense, all bearing the salvation of the righteous and Israel as their central import. Yet, after this has been stated and has been proved by structural and literary analysis (see Breech's article), the dissatisfaction with the conversations between Ezra and the angel remains.

This little book is well worth consulting by anyone interested in furthering his understanding of central motives in Judaism in the generation of the destruction. This is evident from the problem posed in the last paragraph, and some of the most penetrating of Licht's comments bear on this issue. It is fitting to conclude this review with a few of his sentences.

³ See, most recently, Breech, *JBL* 92 (1973), pp. 267-274.

⁴ W. Harnisch, *Verhängnis und Verheissung der Geschichte*, Göttingen, 1969.

“The expectation of the end of days and the day of judgment does not cancel out the misfortune of Zion which has already taken place. Even less does it do away with the suffering of mankind. To the contrary, the glorious reward of the righteous in the future will be of no profit to mankind in general, for most men have sinned. What, therefore, is the purpose of life? We are indeed punished for our sins, but it was God who gave us the ability to sin: it was God who brought about the destruction of most of mankind on the day of judgment ... Ezra asks, “Why, then, is God called merciful?” (p. 11)

To this the angel can only respond:

“If you survive you shall see and if you live long you shall marvel” (4:26)

Described by Dr. Michael Stone

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