

Dr. David deSilva, Apocrypha, Lecture 4, A Closer Look: 2 Esdras

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This is Dr. David DeSilva in his teaching on the Apocrypha. This is session 4, A Closer Look: Second Esdras.

With Second Esdras, we come to the last of the books within the Apocrypha that are particularly focused on the land of Israel and life in the land.

But with Second Esdras, we have to fast forward from the Hasmonean period to the period of Roman domination and well into that period. Judean independence came to an end in 63 BC. It was a short-lived stretch of maybe 80 years when Israel wasn't under the yoke of the Gentiles.

But because of strife within the Hasmonean dynasty, they try to get this right, the great-grandchildren of Simon, the last brother of Judas. Because of the strife between these two parties, Rome was invited, which is always a mistake in the ancient world. Rome was invited to come in and mediate and settle the dispute. The result is that Rome did, in fact, mediate and settle the dispute in favor of one of the two claimants.

But that claimant was restored to the high priesthood while Judea itself became a kind of protectorate under the Roman governor of the province of Syria. So, the internal Jewish rulers became answerable to the Roman overlord, the Roman governor. And as the first century BC ended, the rule of Rome became even more direct.

First through a man named Antipater, an agent of Rome, a faithful ally of Rome. And then through his son, whose name everyone will know, Herod the Great. Now, after maybe a century of Roman rule, Jews decided that they had had enough.

And so, when we get to about 66 AD, 120 years after Pompey the Great's invasion, we come to the great, or I should say, the first Jewish revolt. And there are ideological reasons for Jews widely to reject Roman rule. We are supposed to be ruled by God.

We are supposed to be ruled by the Torah. We are supposed to be ruled by the priests and the activity of the temple. However you slice it, we are not supposed to be ruled by some foreign power.

And let's be honest, Roman rule for much of the time, through its governors especially, was poorly handled in Judea. Just insensitive governor after the

insensitive governor was sent. And finally, the last few governors, if Josephus was to be believed, were just out to make all the money they could by whatever corrupt means necessary while they were positioned there in the province.

And so, there was increasingly simmering resentment against Roman rule, which finally boiled over in 66 to the great Jewish revolt. Well, despite their fervor, zeal, and commitment, Judea was no match for the legions of Rome. It was a slaughter from beginning to end.

Within nine or 12 months, the great general Vespasian had quelled every pocket of rebellion in Galilee and pressed on through Judea, with the exception of a few desert fortresses that he had besieged and kind of locked up. We all know the story of Masada, but also a few others like Machaerus and Herodium that had been seized. And he left his son in charge of the siege of Jerusalem.

His son Titus, wanting to save Roman lives, allowed for infighting within Jerusalem and starvation to weaken the enemy as much as possible before finally breaking through the walls with his legions and ending the resistance, resulting in the most unfortunate destruction of the temple itself. Now, Josephus said that that wasn't Titus's intention. But from the aftermath, one has to believe that Titus at least warmed up to the idea because, indeed, no stone was left upon another by the time the Romans were done with the edifice that stood on top of the temple mount.

This leaves Jews with some significant theological problems. And that's where Second Esdras comes in. Second Esdras is written, for the most part, to wrestle with the theological problems in the wake of the terrible defeat of the Romans.

But even more than that, the destruction of the temple, the elimination of the sacrificial cult, and the failure of God to punish the far worse nation that had done that. So, when we open Second Esdras, we find the author basically admitting that, yes, we got what we deserved. We have violated your covenant.

We didn't keep your laws. Deuteronomy is always right. But are the lives of Babylon's inhabitants any better? And by Babylon, the author is really pointing his finger at Rome.

What we have here is it's kind of a reframing of modern history, the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome, using the language and scenes, and even the people of ancient history, Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon. So, we read, are the lives of Babylon's inhabitants any better? Is that why Babylon has gained dominion over Zion? Does Babylon do better than Zion? Has any other nation known you besides Israel? What tribes have believed your covenants as have the tribes of Jacob? I have traveled widely among the nations and seen them enjoying abundance while not giving your commandments a thought. When have those who live on earth not sinned in your

sight? Or what other nation has observed your commandments as has ours? So, on the one hand, yes, we sinned, we got what we deserved.

But the Romans have sinned far worse. When are they going to get their comeuppance? If there is justice, God, in your ordering of things, how can you punish us who at least, you know, from time to time care about your covenant and fail to punish those who have never given you or your covenant a second thought? Now, before we proceed further with 2 Esdras, we need to think about some literary issues. 2nd Esdras is actually three texts in one, as we currently have it.

The core of 2nd Esdras, 2nd Esdras 3-14, is the Jewish apocalypse written around 100 AD. And that's important because decades have passed, and Rome has only continued to flourish, expand her rule, and do better and better. This text, by the way, this portion of 2nd Esdras is often referred to as 4th Ezra in scholarly literature and even in some ancient literature.

Now, the first two chapters of 2nd Esdras in the Apocrypha are a Christian preface that was added sometime during the 2nd century AD. These first two chapters are often referred to as 5th Ezra. We know they're a Christian addition because there are clear echoes of both Matthew and Revelation in that text.

Not to mention, the message of those first two chapters basically has to do with the transfer of the people of God from historic Israel to the new community of Gentiles and Jews in Christ. So that's another dead giveaway that those first two chapters are a Christian text. And then the last two chapters of 2nd Esdras, 15 and 16, appear to be a Christian conclusion added to this whole growing mass, added during the 3rd century AD, particularly responding to persecution and other issues that Christians are facing in 3rd century Asia Minor.

We're going to focus on the original layer of 2nd Esdras, the Jewish apocalypse at the core of it, the purpose of which is to shore up the Jewish worldview and belief in the covenant in the face of experiences that threaten to undermine the covenant completely. And the author looks for answers or presents answers in the frame of an apocalypse. Now, we know of one apocalypse in the New Testament, Revelation.

We know of pieces of apocalypses in the Old Testament, for example, the second half of Daniel. But if we keep our reading limited to the scripture, we don't really encounter a lot of apocalypses. But Jews wrote one might say, at least a dozen apocalypses that have survived from the period between about 250 BC and 100 or so AD.

And all of these apocalypses seem to pursue a common strategy. They want to get the big picture again, which puts the pieces of the immediate picture back in place.

So, there's confusion; there are questions, there's tension, and unresolved challenges right here in front of our faces in the here and now.

How do we get the perspective we need on the mess in front of us so that we can find a faithful response to the mess in front of us? Well, the way to get there is to get back to the bigger picture that puts what's right in front of us in perspective. Fourth Ezra does this in a number of ways. One way that I haven't listed, but that's important, is that it looks back in time to when the Jewish people had to deal with this kind of mess before.

This is not the first time we've watched our temple destroyed and watched the destroyer continue to flourish for decades. But if we get a little perspective, we can say, where are we now? And where is Babylon now? Israel continued to have a story, but Babylon did not pass a certain point. So, that begins to put the questions raised by Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and its temple into perspective.

But then the author, Fourth Ezra, also gives us scenes of post-mortem reward and punishment. So, this life only isn't the place for answers to come. He gives us scenes of Rome's future judgment.

God will hold this monstrosity accountable, just as God has historically held Babylon responsible and every other oppressor responsible for what they have done to God's people. He also gives us scenes of the future restoration of Jerusalem and the people of Israel under God's Messiah. So, in light of this bigger picture, if we could see it, and the author of Fourth Ezra helps his readers see it, in light of this bigger picture, God's justice, God's promises, and God's covenant can still all be affirmed.

It still makes sense to live by the Torah. So as we turn to some parts of Fourth Ezra, And so we read, as Ezra, the fictional Ezra, addresses God in prayer, You gave Adam one command, and he disobeyed it. And so, you immediately appointed death for him and for his descendants.

Your glory passed through the four gates of fire, earthquake, wind, and ice so that you would give the law to Jacob's descendants, the rules to be observed to Israel's offspring. But you didn't take away from them the inclination to do evil so that your law might bear fruit in them. The first Adam, burdened with this inclination, disobeyed you and was overcome.

But so were all those descended from him. The disease became permanent. The law was in the people's hearts, along with the wicked root.

And that which was good departed, and the wickedness remained. So, as the author contemplates how his people got into this position in the first place, how they got into the position where God would destroy the city and its temple by means of this

foreign nation, he considers that, in a way, it's really all God's fault. On the one hand, God gave us the law, which is great.

The law has its blessings for obedience, which are great. It has its curses for disobedience, which aren't so great, but it all makes sense. But what good is all of that if, in our hearts, we still have this bent toward sinning? And so, this author looks to the story of Adam as the root cause.

Adam sinned against the one command, and that which afflicted him became, and he even uses this language, the permanent disease that afflicts the human race. We just can't get beyond the inclination toward evil, which keeps overcoming us in our intentions to do good. If that sounds like Paul in Romans 7, it should.

The first century witnesses the development of a new take on the difficulties of obeying the law, and it witnesses a new take on the origin of evil. This is an aside, but it's for free. Ezra, like Paul, looks to Adam for the source of all troubles.

Adam and the author of 4th Ezra are probably the first people to do that. Prior to this time, Jewish authors looked to the story of the Watchers in Genesis 6:1-4, to explain the origin of evil in the world. Adam and Eve, okay, we all know that story, it's there, but the real problem happened when angels in heaven decided that the daughters of human beings on earth looked really fine.

And so, angels brought foreign and dangerous knowledge to human beings. They taught us the art of mining for metal so that we could learn greed by wanting gold so we could make better weapons and learn better violence by making swords. They brought the arts of cosmetics so that women could inflame males' lust more.

They brought all manner of forbidden arts. And their children, the offspring, the giants, wreaked all kinds of havoc upon humanity. And when they finally died or were killed by God's judgment, their souls became the evil demons that continue to afflict mankind.

That is the primary place that Jews go to explain what's wrong with the world prior to the first century, when Adam, or Adam and Eve, when their story rises more to the fore, as it does in this text. Now, the answer that Ezra gets from the angel isn't very satisfactory. But what the angel basically says is, well, it's difficult but certainly possible.

Looking to Deuteronomy, it's feasible. And, really, the law matters far more than your complaining. So, stop and simply fight the contest that God has put before you.

And so, we read in 2 Ezra 7, these are the rules, referring to the demand to obey the Torah, which is the way in which one honors one's creator. These are the rules for

the contest in which everyone born on earth takes part. Those who are defeated will suffer what you said, namely, to be lost and suffer punishment eternally.

But those who conquer will receive what I said, namely, a welcome into the age to come that God has prepared for the righteous. This is the path that Moses declared when he was alive: speak to the people, and choose life for yourself so that you may live. Here, quoting specifically, Deuteronomy 30:19. So, the angel, Uriel, who is Ezra's conversation partner, answers that, yes, the contest is difficult, but it is feasible.

And the prize for victory is great. And ultimately, the rationale is, you know, God's honor matters more than anything else. So, we're not going to wink at transgression.

And it's better that many people perish than that God's honor be smirched because the law is despised. So, keep pressing on, keep fighting against the evil inclination because it lies in you to conquer it. It's difficult, but you can do it.

And the reward is great. Another issue that Ezra, the fictional character that is taking us through this book, that Ezra raises has to do with the doctrine of election, God's choice of Israel. He poses the question, on numerous occasions throughout this book, what does election mean when we are trampled again and again by other nations? So, for example, in chapter three, he will ask the question, how is election meaningful given our national fortunes and the difficulty of living up to the rigors of the covenant obligations so as to attain the covenant promises? In chapter five, he'll raise the question differently.

If God really chose Israel from among all the other nations, why do those other nations continue to exercise domination over Israel? Finally, in chapter six, in his third complaint, he raises the question, after a lengthy kind of reminiscence of the days of creation, he comes to his point: if God created this world for Israel, why does Israel not enjoy its fruits? While those nations that are not worth spit in God's sight devour Israel itself? The answer that the angel gives comes back to the question of God's justice and the essential role of obedience to the Torah. In essence, election isn't nearly as important as Torah observance. There's no free ride to God's blessings.

Only those among Israel who keep the Torah and honor God by honoring God's law will enjoy the covenant blessings. And so, we read in the fourth chapter, part of the angel's answer to the first complaint, that election, justice, and the answers to all these questions are deferred to the age to come. The world is indeed rushing to its end.

Indeed, it can't bring the things that are promised to the just during this age because this world is full of sadness and sickliness. The evil about which you asked me has indeed been sown, and its full harvest hasn't yet come. If that which was sown isn't

reaped, and the place where evil has been sown hasn't departed, the field where good is sown won't come.

In this, we find a classic statement of apocalyptic pessimism. Giving up on this world, giving up on this age. Basically, saying this age is ruined by sin and its consequences, and it will simply have to run its course.

The place where righteousness and its consequences will have a home is the age yet to come. The age that won't have a place until this age has run its course and is swept aside. The angel also answers, in regards to the later complaint, that election pertains not to all ethnic Jews but only to those Jews who have stored up faith as a treasure with God.

Those Jews who have struggled hard to overcome the evil inclination fashioned within them so that it wouldn't lead them astray from life to death. Again, recalling the language of Deuteronomy 30. The angel promises that the covenant blessings do indeed await this Israel, this limited portion of Israel, after death, but also after God's decisive interventions in the history of this world.

For this reason, the angel says, the Most High has made not one world but two. And it's only in the second one that the covenant blessings will come to the righteous portion within Israel. About halfway through 4 Ezra, we make a shift from one kind of apocalyptic dialogue, the dialogue between a visionary and an angel, to another kind of apocalyptic medium, namely a series of visions.

It still involves dialogue with the angel to explain the visions, but it's now quite different. It's not just conversation; it's vision and explanation. The first of these visions has to do with Jerusalem's transformation.

And this is often regarded as a turning point in Ezra's story, coming to grips with reality. Ezra goes out into a field, and he meets a woman who is mourning the loss of her son. Ezra counsels her to stop worrying about her individual grief and look around her at the grief of all of Jerusalem.

And somehow to be comforted in her individual grief by the fact that the entire city, the entire nation, shares in grief and has come to grief. And then he sees this woman transformed into a great and glorious city before his very eyes. And he's shocked and appalled by this.

And the angel appears to say, you see, this is Zion. She mourns now for her children. She mourns now because of her desolation.

But she will be transformed in God's future to achieve a glory that she had never previously enjoyed. And this begins to give Ezra a fresh hope, a new hope. And as he

moves then into the next series of visions found in chapters 11 and 12, he moves into visions that deal with the question of God's judging the oppressor of Zion.

God's finally judging Rome. And so, in those chapters, we have a vision of a great eagle. And this is a thing.

Apocalypses really don't try to hide what they're saying, right? Everyone knows that the eagle is the symbol of Rome because Rome sticks an eagle everywhere on the top of every standard of an army.

Well, on the top of every army standard. Or in engravings of the city of Rome. Or, on the back of her coins, you see an eagle standing on top of the world.

So, Ezra has his own vision of an eagle. An eagle with 12 heads and three no, 12 wings and three heads. Each wing represents an emperor in its turn.

And then, at a certain point, a close-up of three emperors in their turn, in their turn, the heads. And what we have here, basically, is the story of Rome from Julius Caesar to Domitian. And the hope that at the end, after Domitian and after a few puny pretenders after him, God will intervene.

God will send a messenger. His messiah to indict Rome, to indict the eagle for all of her crimes. And so we read in 2nd Esdras 11, the messiah comes and says to Rome, you have ruled over the world with much terror and over the whole world with harsh oppression.

You have lived in the world with deceit for so long. You judged the earth, but not in truth. For you oppressed the meek and injured those who cause no unrest.

You hated those who spoke the truth and loved liars. You destroyed the dwellings of those who bore fruit and tore down the walls of those who had done you no harm. Your insolence has ascended to the Most High and your pride to the mighty one.

Therefore, eagle, you must utterly vanish. Then the whole earth will be refreshed and restored, set free from your violence, and we'll hope for the judgment and mercy of him who made it. So here in this vision of a lion, I should have mentioned, because that's an important messianic figure, this vision of a lion indicating the eagle, pronouncing judgment upon the eagle, and God's impending destruction of the eagle's whole body, and her wings, and all of her wretched parts, answers Ezra's first complaint.

How long, O Lord, will you not judge those who have trampled your city, however justly? In God's good future, that would come to pass. Now, what we find in Ezra that might be somewhat disturbing is that Gentiles don't have any share in God's good

future. At no point does Ezra give a hint that a Gentile is going to do the law and become part of God's people.

He has a very reductionistic view of the elect. It doesn't include any Gentile, and it doesn't include most of Israel. It just includes those within Israel who struggle against the evil inclination and keep the law, and thus honor the creator, not only of this age but of the next age, who will reward those who honor him in this age with life and good things in the age to come.

As for Gentiles, the only thing the author really has to say about them shows up in 2 Ezra 6 and the following. You have said that the other nations born of Adam are nothing, that they are like spit, and you have compared their abundance to a drop from a pitcher. But look now, Lord.

These nations that are valued as nothing rule over us and devour us, while we, your people, whom you have called your oldest offspring, your one and only child, those who are zealous for you, your dearest ones, are handed over to them. If the world was created for our sake, why don't we possess our world as an inheritance? How long will this situation last? It's difficult not to read texts like this without hearing Paul's burning question. Is God the God of the Jews only? Is God not also the God of the Gentiles? This is a point at which the early Christian movement would stand out strongly against its environment and a point that would draw heavy criticism against the early church from members of the parent religion and members of the Jewish people.

The final word in 4 Ezra is an affirmation of the Torah as the path to life. By the time we get to 2 Ezra 14, which is actually the last chapter of 4 Ezra, all of Ezra's complaints, questions, and challenges have been answered. There is justice for Israel upon the disobedient within Israel, but also for the righteous within Israel.

There is justice for the nations whom God has already taken in hand and foreseen how he will indict and bring their reign to an end and gather his scattered oppressed people under the aegis of his Messiah. These questions have all been answered. So, in the last chapter, we have the reconstitution of the scriptures.

Ezra gathers five scribes to himself because, in the story, the scriptures have been lost, along with the burning of Jerusalem and the temple and what have you. Ezra gathers five scribes around him, and an angel gives Ezra a fiery liquid to drink. So he drinks the cup and begins to spout wisdom.

What he spouts out is the text of the scriptures and the text of 70 additional books, which these scribes then write down day and night to get the text down. In an interesting bit of detail, the author says, they write these books down in a new script

which they did not know, the square script that we know as Hebrew. Well, that we read our Hebrew Bibles and what have you.

And so, they produced 24 books for all the people and 70 books to be hidden and kept for the wise among the people. With the reconstitution of canon, the 24 books and additional texts that are notable in the story are equally inspired, just not equally to be shared. Alongside this, we have the new commission in Ezra's own lips to the people to keep the Torah.

All of his complaints are gone. All of his questions about the covenant are gone. And he says in 2nd Ezra's 14, our fathers received the law of life, but they didn't keep it.

And you also transgressed after them. You were given land by allotment in the region of Zion. You and your fathers did evil and didn't keep the ways that the Most High had commanded you.

Since he is a just judge, in time, he took away from you what he granted. Now, you are here in exile, and your relatives live even farther away. If then you will rule your mind and instruct your heart, you will be kept alive.

And after death, you will attain mercy. So, Ezra the doubter, Ezra the questioner, has become Ezra the promoter of the Deuteronomistic view of history and its promises once again. He has taken his reader along that same journey to wrestle with all the questions of the day that faced Judaism in the wake of the defeat of the first Jewish revolt and the destruction of the temple and positioned them to move in the very direction that rabbinic Judaism would take them.

A wholehearted, almost singular focus on the doing of the Torah, the practice of the Torah as the way to life now and into the age to come.

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