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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

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The Woman whose son died as he entered his bridal chamber (4 Ezra 9 and 10)*

J C O'Neill

As Gunkel saw, 4 Ezra 9 and 10 contains an ancient tradition about a woman whose son died as he entered his bridal chamber. This tradition is more extensive than Gunkel thought, and reaches its conclusion in the transfiguration and ascension of the woman with a cosmic upheaval caused by her cry. The woman's son was seen to represent the Messiah. Another ancient tradition about a city that comes down from heaven has been woven together with the woman tradition. A later interpreter of the combined traditions has given the combination a messianic reading.

Did anyone in Judaism at the time of Jesus think that the Messiah had to come in obscurity and die before he would return in glory to inherit the Kingdom? This question, for so long dismissed as an impossibility, partly on the basis of 1Cor 1. 22-25, is again being asked with new seriousness (O'Neill: 1995, 96-97, 121 *et passim*). The Fourth Book of Ezra (2 Esdras 3-14 in the English AV Apocrypha) contains two mentions of the death of a son, the death of the Son of God in 7.29, and the death of the son of a Woman in 10.1. Perhaps there is also another death implied, the previous death of the man from the sea in 13.3, for the sea represents the realm of chaos and of death.

This paper is devoted to the story of the woman who goes out of the city into a field and mourns the death of a long-awaited son who died as he entered his bridal chamber, 4 Ezra 9.38-10.4.

Gunkel has performed the great service of showing that this section must have had an independent existence before it was incorporated into our book, and Michael Stone pretty well concedes the validity of Gunkel's case. Stone notes the peculiar names for God (9.45a, *God*; 9.45b, *The Strong One* or *God* or *Most High*; 9.44, variants to *Most High of God* [Arabic 1], *the Lord* [Arabic 2]; see Violet); the Rabbinic parallels (PesRab 26 [Friedmann 131b]: the prophet

Jeremiah met a woman mourning the death of her seven sons when the house fell in and her husband was away, Stone: 1990, 321); the neighbours of 9.45 who play no further part in the story and do not appear in the interpretation (and note some other neighbours who do mourn Sion when some refuse, 10.8); and five further features of the story that are not interpreted in the allegorical key, 10.42-48 (the daily and hourly prayer of 9.44; the death on the wedding night, 10.1; the extinguishing of the lamps, 10.2; the mourning until the second night, 10.3).

However, when we pay close attention to the whole section from 9.23 to the end of chapter 10, we cannot rest easy in a theory that discovers only one source, the remainder being regarded as the work of a writing prophet. There are too many discrepancies to make that theory tenable.

Notice that the vision of a city that is built that hath foundations (10.27b-28, 51-55) is a distraction from the central simple drama of the woman. Both involve the seer who is in a field outside the city (Table, A: 9.24-26; 10.32; 10.51-54; B: 9.29 [desert]; 10.3-4; 10.17-18). Both have the seer lying down and troubled in mind (A: 9.27; B: 10.30). An angel comes in both accounts (A: 10.28, 30-32; B: 10.29-30). There are two separate explanations, an explanation of the empty field where a city has been built (A: 10.51-55) and an explanation of the death of the son, and of the cry, the transfiguration and the disappearance of the woman (B: 10.38-41, 49-50). Of course, the idea of Jerusalem as mother is to hand in the Bible and is often exploited—as in the special addition to the Amida for the Ninth of Ab cited by Michael Stone (1990, 322; Singer: 1962, 105). The idea is mentioned explicitly (Zion, the mother of us all, 10.7), but the images of the woman and that of the city are not integrated in story form.

Notice above all that the allegorical interpretation of the vision makes nothing of the bridal chamber and does not explain the transfiguration of the woman.

Let us start with the allegorical interpretation, 10.42-48 (see Table, C). The text is damaged at the reference to Solomon in 10.46, so badly damaged that here we must, I think, accept the longer reading

of L as the original rather than as an attempt to mend a damaged text. (L has the better reading also at 3.24: *And Solomon his son built a house for your name and set up a sacrificial altar in it on which the priests would bring you offerings as you commanded Moses your servant.*) The problem is, If the woman stands for Jerusalem, what does her son stand for? Stone's lucid section on the allegory (1990, 334-6) fails to resolve the matter because he tries both to make the woman bear all the weight of the allegory and to reduce the son to "a cardboard player". If we can accept the longer reading at 10.46, everything falls into place: the woman is Jerusalem and the son the Temple. There is, of course, no use for the bridal imagery nor for the woman's transfiguration. The allegory works from the starting point of 10.27, where the woman disappears and the city appears in her place (see Table, A: 10.27b; B: 10.27a). But we have seen that there were probably two originally independent stories, one of the city that is built that hath foundations and the other of a woman whose long-awaited son died. The story of the woman who lost her son on his wedding night contained the prophet's rebuke of the mourning woman in which he reminded her of the greater plight of Zion (10.5-8), "the Mother of us all" (10.7; cf. 10.8 Syriac). This story had already attracted another tradition about the desolation of Zion (Table, B3: 10.19-23). These references to Zion would have naturally prompted a compiler to bring in another tradition about a city that comes down from heaven, the New Zion (Table, A). The allegorist who combined the traditions A and B identified the city with the woman and the temple with the son (10.42). It follows that the allegorical interpretation is later than the combination of the two stories.

We seem to have before us four distinct sources. A fairly literal translation of the Latin of 9.23-10.60, with reference, where necessary, to the other versions, is given below, rearranged to show the four sources (see Table). The longest of these, the second (B), has received traditional surcharges (B1, B2 and B3).

Section C (10.42-48) is based on a text in which sources A and B were already combined, because section C works from the identification of the woman with the city, an identification that could only arise from the combination of A and B. It offers an

allegorical interpretation of A and B.

Source A (9.23-27; 10.27b-28; 10.30c-33a, 51-55) is about the seer's fear when he sees a vision of a city that was built having foundations, and comes to believe that he will be excluded from that city (10.27b-28). Because he has admitted that his prayer may well be a reproach (10.28), he is comforted at the end by the invitation to go in to the city and to see its splendour (10.55).

Source B (9.28-30; 9.38-10.8; 10.15-18, 24-27a, 29-30, 33b-41, 49-50) begins with a prayer of the seer for enlightenment (9.28-30). It contains the story of the vision of the woman who came out of the city in mourning for her son who died on the night he entered his bridal chamber. It is surcharged with traditional passages. B1 (9.31-37) is an elaborate meditation on the Law which, unlike other things which perish leaving their container unharmed, itself never perishes, while the "containers", the people who should have cherished it, do perish. This passage does not quite fit the context. It seems to have been inserted here because 9.30 referred to the *seed* of Jacob, and this tradition concerns the Law which is *sown* in you. B2 (10.9-14) seems to be a traditional word of comfort (rather in the spirit of Job's comforters) for a woman who has lost a child. The argument is that the earth is enormously fertile, yet only a tiny portion of her seeds come to fruition. To the woman's complaint that she has suffered the pangs of childbirth, the reply seems to be that the earth, too, suffers pangs in giving fruit to its Maker (cf. 1En 45.4-5; 51.4-5; 2 Bar 32.6; 44.12; 57.2; 4 Ezra 7.75; 11.46; 13.26; Rom 8.19-22). B3 (10.19-23) is a beautiful word of consolation, listing all the terrible things that have happened to Zion, but drawing from that the hope that the very handing over of the seal of Zion to those who hate Israel must be the prelude to God's intervention on behalf of his people. It has no particular relevance to the mourning mother but fits the theme of the sufferings of Sion already mentioned by the seer in his rebuke of the woman in 10.5-15, itself an ancient tradition.

D (10.56-60) is the beginning of a new collection, put here because the end of Source A talks of the vision of your *eyes* (10.55) and the beginning of Source D speaks of the hearing of your *ears* (10.56).

These sources were all put together for fairly superficial reasons. A source about a vision of a city come down from heaven in a vacant field would go together with a source about a mourning woman, because Zion is our mother and the mourning woman was asked to consider the plight of Zion. But there is no actual connection between a story of a city coming down from heaven (10.27b, 51-55) and a story of a woman who bears a son who dies which ends with the woman's being snatched up into heaven (10.25-27a, 50).

If there is anything in my argument, we are required to regard the story of the woman who mourned her son (B) as longer than in Gunkel's reconstruction; the source in fact had an ending. Stone had to imagine a lost ending, but this does not seem likely to me. The ending has the transfiguration of the woman, her uttering a cry that shakes the whole earth and her disappearance (10.25b-27a), and the explanation of the angel in which he emphasizes that the seer's attempts to console the woman led to his vision of her glory (10.33b-50).

What did this mean? The woman here is not Jerusalem but an especially favoured woman who first receives a son in her long period of barrenness, who prepares him for his wedding, who loses him as Tobias's bride lost her previous seven husbands, but who, by her persistence in mourning, even unto death, is transfigured. She it is who utters a cry that shakes the whole earth (cf. the cosmic upheavals that accompany the birth of the Marvellous Counsellor in 1QH 3.7-10).

I do not see any other reasonable interpretation of this story than that the Woman is the Mother of the the Son of God. Her child is the Messiah. He dies as he is about to marry his bride, which is, of course Jerusalem, representing the faithful. His Mother mourns his death, but her mourning will have an end when her glory is revealed and her voice shakes the earth as she brings the Messiah to birth again, this time to reign. The seer who saw the vision is assured that his sorrow has been rewarded by a vision of the woman's glory, the glory of the Mother of the Messiah (10.29-30, 33b-41, 49-50).

The seer employed a traditional word of comfort (10.16) which was originally a general admonition to a mother who mourned the loss

of a child to accept God's will so that she would receive praise as a righteous woman among women, be raised from the dead at the general resurrection, and receive back the child she mourned. Its use in the story was particularly appropriate because the story, although primarily a vision of the Mother of the Messiah, was built on the view that the Messiah who died would return in glory. This idea is most clear in 2 Baruch 30.1; SibOr 5.256-259, but is also implied in the emergence of the man from the sea (4 Ezra 13.1-4) (O'Neill: 1991; 1995, 96-97).

The allegorical interpretation, section C, also bears further examination. If my reading above was correct, it is also messianic. The combination of the two ideas of the woman and the city is traditional. The suggestion that the woman's son is the Temple may also be traditional. The woman bears a son; Solomon builds a Temple. The Temple is destroyed. What is the reader of the allegory as attached to the combined stories of the city and the mourning woman to expect? The seer at first saw the likeness of a woman no more, but a city that is being built appeared to him (10.42); the reader who saw the likeness of the old city no more would expect to see the Heavenly Jerusalem in which there was no temple since "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it" (Rev 21.22). The return of the Lord to Jerusalem was associated in the Judaism of the Eighteen Benedictions with the reign of the Messiah; the fourteenth benediction reads:

And to Jerusalem, thy city, return in mercy, and dwell therein as thou hast spoken; rebuild it soon in our days as an everlasting building, and speedily set up therein the throne of David. (Singer: 1962, 51)

The strange reference in John 2.21, *But he was speaking of the temple of his body*, is perhaps not after all "a comical expression of bewilderment" ("eine komische Auskunft der Verlegenheit" Bultmann: 1941, 89 n. 1) but a reference to an old Jewish tradition that the return of the Messiah would be the restoration of the glory of the Temple to Jerusalem (Rev 21.22-23). Elsewhere in John we have a reference to the water flowing from the side of the Messiah compared to the water flowing from the Temple (John 7.37-38;

Ezek 47.1-12; see Beasley-Murray).

From 4 Ezra 9.23-10.60 we may add two more to the list of possible passages showing that some Jews expected that the Messiah would die before he came to reign in glory: B and C in the Table.

Judaism had to hand a rich storehouse of images linking the past history of God's dealings with his people with their future hopes of restoration. Eve, who bore both Cain and Abel, would bear one who would bruise Satan's head and whose heel Satan would bruise. Jerusalem is a barren woman who travails with child and brings forth more children than the married (Isa 54; Gal 4.26). The Temple was revealed in vision to Adam, to Abraham, and to Moses, and it is the glory of Jerusalem, the City of David (2 Baruch 4.1-7). The Lord would give a sign: a virgin should conceive and bear a son (Isa 7.14). Each of these images was sharp, and each was set in a larger framework of belief: that God, who had created men and women, who had chosen Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who had sent Moses and raised up David, would redeem his people and restore Paradise and bring the new Jerusalem and the new Temple. There David's son would reign. When the ancient traditional visions came to be written down, a vision such as that of the heavenly Jerusalem, which was clear and exact, could easily be combined with a vision of a woman who mourned a son. The reason? Jerusalem was a Mother. The resulting mixture we moderns try to read as literature, the work of an author—and we become confused. Those for whom the traditions were written read slowly, and meditated on each picture as it came up. They also read as sharing the credal framework within which the visions originated and were preserved. Each vision to them remained sharp, and all the visions cohered in one overarching plan of salvation.

We moderns need gently to separate the original self-contained visions before we can rightly read the texts as they were meant to be understood by the community of faith that preserved them.

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Table
The Component Parts of 4 Ezra 9.23-10.60

A	B	B1	B2	B3	C	D
The City	The Woman	Seed Not Destroyed	Earth's Loss	Zion's Plight	Meaning of A+B	Intro. to Next Section
9.23-27	9.28-30	9.31-37	10.9-14	10.19-23		
	9.38-10.8					
	10.15-18					
	10.24-27a					
10.27b-28	10.29-30					
10.30c-33a	10.33b-41					
	10.49-50				10.42-48	
10.51-55						10.56-60

Each verse is numbered. The point at which another source has been incorporated is marked by the jump in verse numbers; the verse at which the source resumes is marked by adding 4 Ezra as well as the chapter and verse (e.g. A: 9.27 resumes at 4 Ezra 10.27b).

A *The Vision of the City*

4 Ezra 9.23

Now then, as for you,

O that you would let seven more days pass!
But do not fast in them.

9.24

Go then into a field of flowers
where no house is built.
And eat only of the flowers of the field
and do not eat flesh
and do not drink wine
but only flowers.

9.25

And pray to the Most High without ceasing
and I will come and speak to you.

9.26

And I went forth as he told me
to the field that is called Ardat
and I sat there among the flowers
and I ate of the herbs of the field
and their nourishment was made completely satisfying.

9.27

And it came to pass after seven days
and I was lying on the grass
and my heart was troubled again as before.

4 Ezra 10.27b

But then a city was built
and a place was shown
as having great foundations
and I was afraid
and I cried out with a loud voice and said,

10.28

Where is Uriel
the angel who came to me from the beginning?
For it is he who made me come
in the multitude of the excess of this mind;
and it has come to pass that my end is in corruption
and my prayer a reproach.

4 Ezra 10.30c

And he said to me,
10.31

What troubles you

and why are you disturbed
and what has unsettled your mind
and the sense of your heart?

And I said,

10.32

Because you deserting me have deserted me.

For I did what you told me

and I went out into the field

and behold I saw

and I see what it is not possible to explain.

10.33a

And he said to me,

4 Ezra 10.51

That is why I told you to remain in the field

where no house is built.

10.52

For I knew that the Most High

was about to reveal these things to you.

10.53

Therefore I told you to come into the field

where there is no foundation of a building

10.54

for neither can [it] support the work of the building of a man

in the place where the city of the Most High is to be revealed.

10.55

You, therefore, do not be afraid

nor let your heart be terrified

but enter

and see the splendor and size of the building

as far as the vision of your eyes is able to see it.

B *The Vision of the Woman who Mourned her Son*

4 Ezra 9.28

And my mouth was opened

and I began to speak in the presence of the Most High

and I said,

9.29

O Lord, in showing us [yourself]

you have showed [yourself] to our fathers in the desert
when they came out of Egypt
and when they travelled in the desert
that was trackless and infertile.

9.30

And in saying you said,
You, Israel, hear me,
and seed of Jacob attend to my words.

4 Ezra 9.38

And while I spoke this in my heart
I lifted up my eyes
and I saw a woman on the right side.
Behold she was mourning
and weeping with a loud voice
and she was very grieved in mind
and her clothes were torn
and there was dust upon her head.

9.39

And I put aside the thoughts which I had been thinking
and I turned to her

9.40

and I said to her,
Why do you weep
and why are you distressed in soul?

9.41

and she said to me,
Allow me, my lord,
to weep and to continue to sigh
since I am greatly embittered in soul
and I am deeply humbled.

9.42

And I said to her,
What has happened to you?

Tell me.

9.43

And she said to me,
I, your handmaid, was barren and did not bear
though I had a husband for thirty years.

9.44

For I every hour and every day
prayed for thirty years to the Most High night and day.

9.45

And it came to pass after thirty years
that God heard me,
(heard the voice of) your handmaid
and saw my humiliation
and looked on my distress
and gave me a son.

And I rejoiced greatly over him,
I and my husband and all my fellow-citizens
and we gave glory to the Mighty One.

9.46

And I reared him with great labour.

9.47

And it came to pass when he had grown up
and I came to take a wife for him
and I set the day for the marriage feast.

10.1

And it came to pass when my son entered the bridal chamber
he fell down and died.

10.2

And we overturned all the lamps
and all my fellow-citizens rose up to console me
and I remained quiet until the next day and until night.

10.3

And it came to pass
when they all had fallen still to console me
that I might be quiet

[Syr: And after they were all asleep
and believed that I had fallen asleep]

and I arose by night and fled
and I came, as you see [me] in this field.

10.4

And I now am resolved not to return to the city
but to stay here,
and I will neither eat nor drink
but without ceasing will mourn and fast until I die.

10.5

And I left the reflections in which I was engaged
and I replied with anger to her and said,

10.6

Foolish are you above all women.
Do you not see our mourning
and the things that have befallen us

10.7

that Zion, the mother of us all,
is grieved with grief
and is humbled with humiliation?

10.8

You [plural] ought to mourn,
for even now we all mourn,
and you [plural] ought to be sad
for we all are sad.

For you [singular] are even sad for one son
but we, the whole world, for our mother [Syriac].

10.15 Now therefore keep your grief to yourself
and bear bravely the troubles that have come upon you.

10.16

For if you acknowledge
the decree of God to be just
you will surely receive your son back in time
and you will be praised among women.

10.17

So go into the city to your husband

10.18

And she said to me,
I will not do it,
nor will I enter the city
but I will die here.

4 Ezra 10.24

[I say to you]

You should shake off you great sadness
and put away from you the multitude of your sorrows
so that [= for] the Mighty One will be merciful to you again
and the Most High will give you rest
as a respite from your troubles.

10.25

And it came to pass while I was speaking to her
and behold her face shone exceedingly bright
and as the appearance of lightning became the look of her face
[Syriac] so that I was afraid to approach her
and my heart was much amazed.

And while I was wondering what this was

10.26

and behold she suddenly emitted the sound of a voice,
loud and completely terrifying,
so that the earth was shaken at her voice.

10.27a

and I looked

and behold the woman was no longer visible to me.

4 Ezra 10.29

[Editorial: And while I was saying this

And behold the angel came to me
who had at the beginning come to me
and he saw me

10.30

and behold I was lying as though dead
and my mind was astray
and he took my right hand
and strengthened me
and stood me on my feet.

4 Ezra 10.33b

Stand up like a man and I will instruct you.

10.34

And I said,

Speak, my lord,
and only do not forsake me
lest I die in error,

10.35

for I have seen what I do not understand
and I hear what I cannot grasp.

10.36

Or is it that my sense fails me
and my soul is dreaming?

10.37

Now, therefore, I pray you, explain to me

about this death.

10.38

And he replied to me and said,
Hear me and I will teach you,
and I will speak to you of the things you fear
for the Most High has revealed to you many secrets.

[Wellhausen: a great mystery]

10.39

For he has seen your right conduct
since without ceasing you grieve for your people
and greatly mourn for Zion.

10.40

[And he said,]

This then is the meaning of your vision.

10.41

The woman who appeared to you a little while ago
whom you saw mourning
and whom you began to console,

4 Ezra 10.49

and behold you saw her likeness
how she mourns a son
and you began to console her for the things that happened to her:
these are to be opened to you.

10.50

And now, since the Most High sees that you are grieving in your
soul
and that with all your heart you sorrow on her account,
he shows you the clear light of her glory
and the beauty of her loveliness.

B1

Seed Not Destroyed

4 Ezra 9.31

[Thus says the Lord]

For behold I sow in you my Law
and bring forth in you fruit
and you will be glorified in it for ever.

9.32

However our fathers receiving the law

did not obey it
and the commandments
they did not keep
and it came to pass that the fruit of the law is not perishing
for it cannot perish
since it is yours.

9.33

But those who received it perished
from not keeping that which was sown in them.

4 Ezra 9.34

And behold it is the rule
that if the earth receives seed
or the sea a ship
or any vessel food or drink
and when anything comes to destroy
what is sown

or what is sent to sea
or what is put in a vessel

9.35

they are destroyed
but the receptacles remain;
yet with us that is not what has come to pass.

9.36

We too who receive the law
by sinning will perish,
and our heart that has received it.

9.37

For the law does not perish
but remains in all its honour [glory].

B2 *Earth's Loss compared with the Loss of a Child*

4 Ezra 10.9

For ask the earth and she will tell you
that she it is who ought to mourn
so many germinated upon her
[but she doesn't].

10.10

From her are the beginnings,

and our psalmody is laid low
and our hymnody is silenced
and our cry of exultation is ended
and our lampstand has been extinguished
and the ark of the covenant is carried away
and our holy vessels are defiled
and the name that is named over us is profaned
and our nobles suffer dishonour
and our priests are immolated
and our Levites go into captivity
and our virgins are defiled
and our wives are raped
and our righteous are carried off
and our children are expelled
and our young men are taken captive
and our warriors are made powerless.

10.23

And, what is worse than all this,
is that the seal of Zion has been surrendered.
[What is there to say] of her glory now?
It has even been handed over to those who hate us.

C *The Meaning of (A) plus (B)*

4 Ezra 10.42

For now indeed you see the likeness of the woman no more
but a city that is being built appears to you

10.43

and since she told you about the death of her son
this is the solution.

10.44

This woman whom you saw,
this is Zion
which you now see as a city that is built.

10.45

And whereas she said to you that she was barren thirty years
that is because there were three times a thousand years
when there was no [temple] offering offered in her.

10.46

And it came to pass after these three years
that Solomon [following L] built the walls of the city of Jerusalem
and a temple for the Lord in her
and offered oblations;
then it was that the barren one bore a son.

10.47

And whereas she said to you
that she brought him up with much labour
that is the period of residence [of the Shekinah (Box)] in Jerusalem.

10.48

And whereas she said to you,
My son on coming into the bridal chamber was struck dead,
that was what came to pass,
the ruin of Jerusalem.

D *The Blessed Seer to See What Will Happen in the Last Days
 (Beginning of a New Section)*

4 Ezra 10.56

And after these things you will hear
as much as the hearing of your ears allows,

10.57

for you are blessed above many
and are named before the Most High as but few.

10.58

But you are to remain here until tomorrow night

10.59

and the Most High will show you
those visions in dreams
of what the Most High will do to those who live upon the earth
in the last days.

10.60

And I slept there that night and the next
as he commanded me.