

THE 94 BOOKS OF EZRA AND THE ANGELIC REVELATIONS OF JOHN DEE

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1. In my SBL paper presented last year in a joint session of the Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism Section and the Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity section¹ I suggested that the study of ancient Jewish and Christian visionary literature might profit from comparison with modern visionary literature and the practitioners of ceremonial magic who have produced it. I flagged in particular the detailed accounts of angelic revelations dictated in the sixteenth century by the scribe Edward Kelley and written up by the Renaissance polymath John Dee. In this paper I undertake such a comparison with a passage in the first-century Jewish apocalypse *4 Ezra* which will illustrate both the conceptual and methodological challenges of such comparisons and some of their potential payoffs.

2. The well-known passage in *4 Ezra* 14:19-48 tells us that before his ascent to heaven Ezra asked God for inspiration from the holy spirit to rewrite the lost law of God so that people would be able to follow it. God ordered Ezra to set aside forty days, prepare writing tablets, and recruit five named scribes, and he promised Ezra to enlighten his heart with the lamp of understanding until the writing was finished, after which some of the revelations should be made public and others divulged only to the wise (vv. 19-26). Ezra took the scribes to an isolated field, where a revelatory voice gave him a cup of fiery liquid to drink, after which he was filled with inspiration and spent the next forty days dictating to the scribes, who took turns transcribing the dictation "in characters which they did not know." Ninety-four books were thus restored, twenty-four (evidently the current canon of scripture) for public consumption and the other seventy reserved only for the eyes of the wise (vv. 37-48).

The possibility has been raised by some scholars that the visionary narratives of *4 Ezra*, while clearly being fictional, show awareness of actual ritual praxis associated with visionary experience in Second Temple Judaism.² Even this passage, replete as it is with

¹ "Praxis and Experience in Ancient Jewish and Christian Mysticism," downloadable as a PDF file at <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/divinity/media/JRD%20Ritual%20praxis%20paper%20SBL.pdf>.

² Daniel Merkur, "The Visionary Practices of Jewish Apocalyptists," *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society* 14 (1989): 119-48; idem, "Cultivating Visions through Exegetical Meditations" in *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism in Honor of Rachel Elior* (ed. Daphna V. Arbel and Andrei A Orlov; Ekstasis 2; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 62-91, esp. pp. 80-87; Michael E. Stone, "Apocalyptic: Vision or Hallucination?" *Milla wa-Milla* 14 (1974): 47-56 (reprinted in Stone, *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha with Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition* [SVP 9; Leiden: Brill, 1991], 419-28); idem, *Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1990), 32-33, 118-24; idem, "A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions," *HTR* 96 (2003): 167-18; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), 214-47, esp. 215-18, 228-29; James R. Davila, "Ritual in the Jewish Pseudepigrapha," in *Anthropology & Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (ed. Louise J. Lawrence and Mario I. Aguilar; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 158-83; idem, "The Hekhalot Literature and the Ancient

miraculous elements, has been explored sympathetically by Michael Stone for signs that some social reality lies behind the fictional narrative. Stone suggests in particular that the function of the scribes in the story "may provide some hint at possible practice of seers of the type of the author of *4 Ezra*."³ Although he does not spell this out, the implication seems to be that there may have been ancient Jewish seers who dictated revelatory books under inspiration while amanuenses wrote the revelations down. If we grant this possibility, the phenomenological similarities between the story in *4 Ezra* 14 and the experiences recounted in detail by John Dee are not without interest.

3. In the early 1580s Dee undertook the angelic workings using Kelley as his "scryer," a mediatory practitioner who purported to receive revelatory visions from angels while gazing into a crystal. He dictated these revelations to Dee, and Dee wrote them down in notebooks, much of whose contents still survives.⁴ Beginning in late 1582 Kelley dictated a detailed system of magic whose reception is described chronologically in Dee's notes and which was later codified in his *De Heptarchia Mystica*. The system involved a seal inscribed with the names of planetary angels and their subsidiaries, along with ritual paraphernalia including a holy table later inscribed in a newly revealed alphabet; a golden ring of Solomon; and an inscribed "lamina" or breastpiece. The new alphabet was revealed in late March of 1583. At the same time and extending into early April, a "holy book" was revealed in a secret language or code, presented in forty-eight pages, each page consisting of a grid of 49 by 49 letters. The book was assigned various titles and is generally referred to today as *Liber Loagaeth*,⁵ and it remained untranslated apart from occasional snippets. Various angelic revelations continued through 1583, during which time Dee and Kelley and their families relocated to Krakow, Poland. The next cycle of important revelations commenced in April of 1584, with the description of a ritual table to be used in the workings, generally known as "the Round Table of Nalvage" (Nalvage being the name of the angel who produced the plans for the table).⁶ It was then intimated that a new revelation was commencing, which would involve 49 "Keys" or "Calls," which, it developed, were a series of nineteen incantations, the last of which could be given thirty permutations.⁷ (The first Call of the forty-nine was deliberately left unexpressed, thus leaving only the nineteen Calls actually to be transmitted.) Dee and Kelley were informed firmly that Nalvage's ability to grant this revelation lasted only until August 1st of that year and that they must complete the process before then.⁸

Remarkably, these Calls came in an entirely new language, supposedly the lost angelic language spoken by Adam and forgotten after the fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden.⁹ The first four Calls were dictated by Nalvage via Kelley in the angelic language

Jewish Apocalypses," in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (ed. April Deconick; SBL Symposium Series 11; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 105-25.

³ Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 428-32, quotation on p. 431. Cf. Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 229.

⁴ The surviving angelic diaries have been published by Joseph H. Peterson in *John Dee's Five Books of Mystery: Original Sourcebook of Enochian Magic* (Boston, Mass/York Beach Maine: WeiserBooks, 2003) (hereafter *JDFBM*) and (badly) by Meric Casaubon in *A True Relation of What Passed for Many Years Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits* (London, 1659, reprinted many times) (hereafter *TFR*).

⁵ *TFR*, 19.

⁶ *TFR*, 73-76.

⁷ *TFR*, 77.

⁸ *TFR*, 77, 92, 117, 146.

⁹ *TFR*, 92-93.

letter-by-letter from a table of letters in the vision, and backwards so as to prevent their accidental catastrophic activation. Each Call was then translated into English.¹⁰ This method proved so cumbersome that it was abandoned, and six weeks later all but the last of the remaining Calls were dictated by Kelley in the angelic language in normal word order in a single marathon session on May 14th.¹¹ English translations of these were only forthcoming on July 5th to 11th, while the final Call and its translation were among the last revelations in the series on July 12th-13th.¹²

The angelic language is unique in the annals of revelatory literature. It has been studied by the linguist Donald C. Laycock, who has shown that its grammar, phonology, and, indirectly, some of its vocabulary are based on English.¹³ It thus was apparently formulated by a speaker of English, who seems to have created it in the process of the composition of the nineteen Calls. The project of inventing the language, composing the texts, and providing coherent translations of them must have been extraordinarily time consuming and must have required a rare creativity and imagination.

During the period that the Calls were dictated, other revelations were dispensed as well. These included descriptions of thirty "Ayres," evidently divisions of the earth into thirty sectors, each subdivided into three (or in the case of the thirtieth, four) subsections, and each overseen by three (or in the last case, four) angels.¹⁴ Another vision described four castles or watchtowers inhabited by kings and a hierarchy of courtiers, all these representing four parallel hierarchies of angels.¹⁵ Then four square grids of letters were revealed, which, it developed laid out a hierarchy of the names of the angels of the four watchtowers, while at the same time, using the same letter tables, encoded the already-revealed names of the ninety-one angels of the thirty Ayres. These tables were joined together by a shared borderline that bore the names of still higher angels in the hierarchy.¹⁶ It was reported that these tables were first delivered to the biblical patriarch Enoch and were now being restored via Kelley and Dee.¹⁷ On July 13th, Dee's fifty-seventh birthday, the names of the thirty Ayres were revealed and the system was complete.¹⁸ Dee, Kelley, and Nalvage had finished well ahead of schedule.

I have recounted the story of these revelations in considerable, perhaps tedious, detail, although I have also somewhat simplified the process. Dee and Kelley were at times beset with "illuding" spirits who gave false revelations that had to be winnowed from the valid ones, and the relationship between the two men was itself at times rocky. But this summary should suffice for the purposes of my analysis.

4. The first step is to lay out a simplistic catalogue of obvious parallels between the narrative of the revelatory recovery of the lost books in *4 Ezra* 14 and the recovery of lost antediluvian lore in the Dee-Kelley workings. Having done so, we will next subject them to critical scrutiny.

¹⁰ *TFR*, 78-111.

¹¹ *TFR*, 118-38.

¹² *TFR*, 189-209.

¹³ Laycock, *The Complete Enochian Dictionary. A Dictionary of the Angelic Language Revealed to Dr. John Dee and Edward Kelley* (Boston: WeiserBooks, 1994).

¹⁴ *TFR*, 153-58.

¹⁵ *TFR*, 168-71.

¹⁶ *TFR*, 172-81.

¹⁷ *TFR*, 174, 196-97, 210, 229

¹⁸ *TFR*, 209.

- i. Both revelations involved the restoration of lost holy books: in the case of *4 Ezra*, the exoteric and esoteric scriptures destroyed as a result of the Babylonian Exile; in the case of the texts delivered through Kelley, incantations in a lost Adamic language and letter-tables encompassing an elaborate, lost system of ritual magic originally revealed to Enoch.
- ii. Some of the revelations involve similar light- and water-related imagery. God promised to enlighten the heart of Ezra and gave him a fiery drink to inspire him and cause him to retain his memory. At the commencement of the dictation of *Liber Loagaeth* the angel brought Dee and Kelley water in a vision, described as a special medicine to cure their imperfections and "reviving and recalling all things past present and to come."¹⁹ Thereafter, as the book was dictated, a shaft of light would shine out of the shewstone and enter Kelley's head, giving him temporary inspiration. When the light departed, Kelley could no longer read the book or even remember the session.²⁰
- iii. In both cases the restored books were associated with a new script: Ezra's books were written in the new script by scribes who had not yet learned it, whereas the angels revealed Dee's books by dictation and they were written down in English letters. During the course of the sessions the angels revealed the new script and then demanded that Dee and Kelley learn the letters. It is not clear that they ever did so and the alphabet seems not to have been used much subsequently.²¹
- iv. In both cases revelations occurred within a divinely mandated schedule: over forty days in *4 Ezra*; for Dee and Kelley (for the reception of the *Liber Loagaeth*) a 48-day period of reception from March 29th (Good Friday) to May 8th; a 40-day hiatus until June 17th, and another 40-day period in which a "perfected" copy of the book in the new script was to be made. The latter deadline does not seem to have been met.²² Then another schedule was announced, this one for the revelation of the Calls, Ayres, and Tables, beginning on April 10th, with a deadline of August 1st, the actual completion occurring on July 13th.
- v. Both revelations involve a seer who dictated whole texts which a scribe wrote down.
- vi. In both cases the restored books were not only miraculously revealed, they were revealed in special formats unknown to the recipients, requiring another level of miracle. Ezra's scribes wrote in characters unknown to them, presumably the new square script of the post-exilic era. The Calls given to Dee and Kelley were dictated in the first instance in the angelic or Adamic language (the first four backwards, letter by letter) and had to be translated into English.

5. It can be said at the outset that not all of the obvious parallels are of significance, that there are notable differences between the accounts even where they are parallel, and that the relationship of some parallels is complex. The revelatory liquid was fiery when drunk by Ezra, but described merely as medicinal water to Kelley and Dee, and the light was in Ezra's heart but it went into Kelley's head. The time constraint on the two sets of revelations is differently motivated: *4 Ezra* echoes the forty-day period of revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai and the revelations were completed exactly on time. The purpose of the 48-day and 40-day periods involving the revelation of the *Liber Loagaeth* is obscure, whereas the subsequent time constraint imposed on Dee and Kelley had to do in some unclear way with limits on the power of the angel Nalvage and their revelations were completed either late or

¹⁹ *JDFBM*, 258-60, 264, 267, quotation on p. 260.

²⁰ *JDFBM*, 286-87, 309, 314, 318, 322.

²¹ *JDFBM*, 269-75. The "holy characters" are mentioned again in *TFR*, 23.

²² *JDFBM*, 327, 395, 398; *TFR* 26-27, 78, 196. I tentatively follow the analysis of Aaron Leitch, *The Angelical Language* (Woodbury, Minn.: 2010) 1:59-96.

well before the deadline. Ezra had five scribes whereas Kelley had only Dee. These scribes also received some level of divine inspiration, whereas Dee did not. Kelley took dictation from named angels, whereas the source of Ezra's dictation is not made explicit. Ezra's revelation apparently included the restoration of canonical or at least exoteric scriptures. The new script was a miraculous flourish to the revelation to Ezra, but was revealed earlier to Kelley and was not used in the revelation of the Calls, Ayres, and Tablets. No new language was used for the revelations to Ezra, but the Adamic language provided the miraculous flourish in the Dee-Kelley revelations. But all this said, the differences in detail should not distract us from the fact that a core of substantial parallels remain.

6. One factor that considerably complicates the comparison of *4 Ezra* with the Dee-Kelley revelations is that Dee's notes demonstrate, as we might well expect, that he knew the Latin version of the book of *4 Ezra* (2 Esdras) and read it carefully, even referring to the events in chapter 14. In an opening prayer to his first five books of notes, Dee comments that God's good angels were sent to Esdras and various other biblical worthies.²³ The angel Uriel who, perhaps not coincidentally was a major player in the early Dee-Kelley revelations, commented in *Liber Primus*, "I lived with Esdras: I lived in him, in the lord, who liveth for ever."²⁴ The reference is clearly to the revelations brought to Ezra by Uriel in *4 Ezra*. In *Liber Quintus*, in the context of a discussion of the (at the time) lost book of Enoch, Dee inquired what had become of the missing books of Ezra (that is, the books mentioned in *4 Ezra* 14) and was informed that the prophets of the Jews had them.²⁵ In later revelations the angel Uriel refers to Ezra as a "prophet," directly citing chapters 9 and 6:28 of *4 Ezra*.²⁶ The angel Gabriel mentions Esdras in association with Moses, Daniel, and "all the rest of the prophets."²⁷ Later still, the angel Levanael refers to a revelation concerning the soul in the Book of Esdras.²⁸

One may thus reasonably suspect that no small portion of the parallels between the angelic revelations of Kelley and Dee and *4 Ezra* 14 were inspired by the two men's direct knowledge of the ancient book. For example, the angelic special medicine may imitate Ezra's draught of fiery liquid and the new alphabet revealed to Kelly may have been suggested by the unknown characters used by Ezra's scribes. At the same time, it would be simplistic to dismiss all of the parallels as insignificant as a result.

In the first place, some of the parallels arise naturally out of Dee's broader and well-documented interests. The idea of a seer who dictates to a scribe is inherent in the informal institution of the "sryer" in Dee's time. Dee used other sryers before and after Kelley and sryers were an—if reluctantly—tolerated and acknowledged cultural phenomenon of the period.²⁹ Dee also had an antiquarian interest in lost scriptural books. As noted above, he sought after lost books of Ezra and Enoch.³⁰ He also shared the current scientific interest in recovering a putative lost Adamic language.³¹ Any influence by the text of *4 Ezra* on these concerns would have at most reinforced and perhaps focused tendencies already present in Dee's thought.

²³ *JDFBM*, 58.

²⁴ *JDFBM*, 85.

²⁵ *JDFBM*, 354-55.

²⁶ *TFR*, 59-60.

²⁷ *TFR*, 116.

²⁸ *TFR*, 371.

²⁹ Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabal, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 16-26.

³⁰ Cf. Harkness, *Conversations*, 99-100, 146-48, 192-93.

³¹ Harkness, *Conversations*, 80-84.

7. More importantly, some of the most interesting aspects of the parallels remain even if we assume a high degree of influence from *4 Ezra*. This brings us to the very difficult question of what actually happened in those sessions in which angels supposedly dictated lost books in an angelic language through Edward Kelley. It is difficult to doubt that Dee transcribed an accurate account of events as he understood them. The diaries are presented as Dee's raw notes, written during the sessions and accumulating over many years, with numerous later reflections annotated in the margins. Although he seems to have shown the diaries to few people, he did not make much of a secret of their existence and some of the events in Dee's life mentioned in them, such as relocations of him, Kelley, and their families, can be documented from outside sources.³² He never published these notes, and their survival seems in large part to be due to happenstance.³³ We have little choice but to regard the diaries as eyewitness accounts produced at the times of the sessions by an honest and highly intelligent participant, albeit one whose desire to believe in a supernatural interpretation of the events doubtless left him open to some level of misreporting and misinterpretation by wishful thinking.

The mental state of Kelley, the actual recipient of the angelic revelations, is a far more complicated problem, and here the best analysis of which I am aware is that by James Justin Sledge in a 2010 article in *Aries*.³⁴ My reflections on Kelley owe much to his discussion. Kelley gave every indication of himself believing that the revelations he dictated had a supernatural origin, sometimes putting himself and those around him to considerable inconvenience and even danger to obey the orders of the angels. A simple acceptance of his and Dee's understanding of the communications as supernaturally supplied by spirits is metaphysically fraught, difficult to defend in detail (the "angelic" language is clearly a modern construction), and ultimately unfalsifiable. But to regard Kelley as a fraud who created the language, composed a substantial set of literarily sophisticated and intricately thematically interlinked poems in this language, memorized them, and foisted them upon Dee, along with a highly complex system of letter tables of angelic names composed at the same time, to maintain his own position as the household scryer is almost equally difficult. Kelley's own obvious commitment to the authenticity of the revelations, along with the absurd overkill of such a project when much easier faux angelic dispensations were already serving the purpose, speak strongly in favor of his own belief in the revelations he appeared to mediate.

We may factor in the possible influence of some mutually reinforcing combination of mental illness—or at least mental departure from the norm—with altered states of consciousness induced by the rituals Kelley practiced in the sessions, but the case would need to be argued with greater specificity than it has been so far—or perhaps than it is possible in principle to argue given the limitations of our sources. At this point I cannot

³² For example, Dee disclosed the existence of the angelic revelations to the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, and even relayed to him a strident and politically highly imprudent rebuke from the angels on September 3, 1584 (*TFR*, 231). The Emperor declined the offer to read the angelic diaries, delegating the task to one Doctor Kurtz, who skimmed through them with Dee in a six-hour meeting on September 15th, (*TFR*, 239-40). Dee also showed some volumes of the diaries to the Spanish Ambassador Don Guillén de San Clemente, on September 25th (*TFR*, 246). For more disclosures of the revelations and the diaries and a discussion of Dee's audience during the relevant period see Harkness, *Conversations*, 51-59.

³³ *JDFBM*, 47-49; *TFR*, Preface, F4-5.

³⁴ Sledge, "Between Loagaeth and Cosening: Towards an Etiology of John Dee's Spirit Diaries," *Aries* 10 (2010): 1-35.

improve upon the proposal of Sledge that a "perfect storm" of circumstances led Kelley to compose the angelic language and texts himself, but in a mental state that had ceased to distinguish between his own actions and the supernatural revelation in which he clearly believed.³⁵ Presumably this state involved a combination of enlightened self interest, a delusory but satisfying sense of self-importance, cognitive dissonance, and genuine belief.

The parallels between *4 Ezra* 14 and the Dee-Kelley angelic revelations are ultimately of interest because the first comes as a literary account in a fictional narrative whereas the second is in the form of an eyewitness account of events that on some level actually happened.

- Ezra sought the divine revelation of lost books of scripture in order to preserve the continuity of his exiled community, a reason that makes sense in the narrative context. In an isolated location over a very short period of time he was inspired to dictate the text of these lost books to scribes chosen for the project. These scribes wrote down the revelations in a new script which they did not know, a process that adds a new layer of miraculousness to the events.
- John Dee sought to recover lost scriptures and the Adamic proto-language both out of antiquarian interest and as part of a process he envisaged for using angelic revelations to repair corruptions in the "Book of Nature" and increase the advancement of scientific knowledge, reasons that made sense in the cultural context of Renaissance England.³⁶ In a project conceived and organized by Dee, his scribe Edward Kelley collaborated with him and in isolated circumstances over a very short period of time Kelley was inspired to dictate powerful lost incantations in the primordial Adamic language (adding a new layer of miraculousness to the process) as well as other revelations once vouchsafed to the patriarch Enoch and subsequently lost. A new script was also revealed to Kelley somewhat earlier, although Dee, who acted as scribe as well as patron, wrote the revelations in the English alphabet.

The shared template is striking, and for our purposes it does not matter greatly whether the earlier narrative exerted some influence on the later events. Nor does the exact explanation of the later events matter greatly. Even if Kelley acted entirely mendaciously and fraudulently, a contingency I consider to be remote, he pulled the fraud off with admirable success. A better understanding is that Dee and Kelley undertook visionary experiments that made sense in their cultural context, with full honesty and goodwill on Dee's part and a more complex combination of sincere belief, self-deception, and cognitive dissonance on Kelley's part, producing revelations that may be regarded as genuine in the social construction of their reality.³⁷

The implications? The phenomenological parallels between the sixteenth-century Dee-Kelley revelations and the first-century fictional account of revelations given to a largely fictional prophet of an earlier era urge us to look at the fictional account in *4 Ezra* in a new light. We have a meticulously documented eyewitness account of a similar revelatory dictation of lost holy books and in this case the eyewitness was the scribe himself. It really happened once. Obviously, I am making no metaphysical claims about the source or validity of the revelations. Rather, the comparison establishes that the cultural context of sixteenth century England permitted the social construction of a reality that we in the twenty-first century would be tempted to dismiss out of hand as impossible. Again, obviously, there is a

³⁵ Ibid., 31-34, quotation on p. 34.

³⁶ Harkness, *Conversations*, 80-90, 158-72.

³⁷ See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) and Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

vast gulf between the cultural context of sixteenth-century England and first-century Palestinian Judaism, but for our immediate purposes they share more with each other than either shares with us. Both held an untroubled belief in the reality of a host of spirits who could and did communicate important information to chosen human beings who placed themselves in suitable ritual contexts. The Dee-Kelley revelations give us additional reason to take seriously the possibility that *4 Ezra* 14 is describing in a fictional context actual methods used by first-century Jewish intermediaries to generate revelatory literature. To put it more forcefully, the Dee-Kelley revelations confront us with well-documented events that compel us to re-evaluate the degree to which the social construction of reality constrains or opens up the range of things that can or cannot happen.

8. In conclusion, I have set out in this paper to explore the possibility that modern accounts of visionary practitioners and their revelations may be of some service for our understanding of apparently similar accounts of revelations to ancient visionaries. The advantage of bringing modern accounts into the discussion is that they are often far better documented than the ancient ones, allowing us a deeper understanding of the methods, psychology, and larger context behind those revelations. The specific comparison between the Dee-Kelley diaries and pseudo-Ezra's revelation of the ninety-four books also illustrates some of the challenges in such comparisons. We must weigh the importance of the possible influence of the earlier text on the later experiences, we must distinguish between accidental similarities and more substantial ones, and we must view both accounts in their own cultural contexts and construct our phenomenological parallels with exceeding care. But when all reasonable precautions have been taken, we still find that the Dee-Kelley texts describe actual events, albeit embedded in a social reality very foreign to us, which give us reason to be more sympathetic to the possibility that *4 Ezra* presents a fictional account behind which may lie actual practices involving automatic dictation of revelatory writings in an ancient Jewish context.