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Published in:
Authoritative Texts and Reception History

Published: 01/01/2017

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Oegema, A., Batovici, D. (Ed.), & De Troyer, K. (Ed.) (2017). The Reception of Isa 40:15 in Liber antiquitatum biblicarum, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra. In *Authoritative Texts and Reception History: Aspects and Approaches* Brill Academic Publishers.

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The Reception of Isa 40:15 in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, 2 *Baruch*, and 4 *Ezra**

Albertina Oegema

1 Introduction

One of the features that link *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, 2 *Baruch*, and 4 *Ezra* together is their reception of Isa 40:15. These three writings, dating from the second half of the first century or the beginning of the second century CE, share with LXX Isa 40:15 a comparison of people to a drop and spittle:

If all the nations are like a drop from a jar and are regarded like a turn of a balance, they will also be regarded like spittle (εἰ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ὡς σταγῶν ἀπὸ κάδου καὶ ὡς ῥοπή ζυγοῦ ἐλογίσθησαν καὶ ὡς σίελος λογισθήσονται).

LXX Isa 40:15; trans. A.O.¹

... and I [i.e., God] will consider them [i.e., Israel] like a drop of water and liken them to spittle (*et tamquam stillicidium arbitrabor eos, et in sputo approximabo eos/eis*).

L.A.B. 7:3²

And the race of men will be to me [i.e., God] like a drop from a pitcher and will be reckoned like spittle (*et erit mihi hominum genus tamquam stillicidium urcei, et tamquam sputum estimabitur*).

L.A.B. 12:4

* I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten and Prof. Dr. Mladen Popović for their valuable comments on previous versions of this paper. Michelle C. Fallen Bailey corrected the English of this paper.

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the lxx are from the nets (New English Translation of the Septuagint).
- 2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* are from DJ. Harrington, trans. and introd., "Pseudo-Philo: (First Century a.d.)," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II, Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works* (ed. J.H. Charlesworth; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 304–377.

⁴ And we [i.e., Israel] behold the multitude of their power while they act impiously; but they [i.e., the hostile nations] will be made like a drop (ܐܕܪܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܩܘܘܒܐ ܕܩܘܒܐ ܕܩܘܒܐ). ⁵ And we see the strength of their power while they resist the Mighty One every hour; but they will be reckoned like spittle (ܐܕܪܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܩܘܘܒܐ ܕܩܘܒܐ).

^{2 Bar.} 82:4–5³

As for the other nations which have descended from Adam, you [i.e., God] have said that they are nothing, and that they are like spittle, and you have compared their abundance to a drop from a bucket (*dixisti ... quoniam salivae adsimilatae sunt et sicut stillicidium de uaso similasti habundantiam eorum*).

^{4 Ezra} 6:56⁴

The use of the imagery of a drop and spittle in a comparison with people probably originates from Isa 40:15. Although mention of a drop or of spittle occurs a couple of times in comparisons elsewhere (Sir 18:10; 26:22; Wis 11:22; *Apoc. Zeph.* 2:5; *L.A.B.* 19:15; *4 Ezra* 9:16), the combination of both the drop and the spittle in a comparison with people is, as far as I know, unique to Isa 40:15, *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra*. As Isa 40:15 is the oldest of these four writings, it is reasonable to assume that the imagery ultimately derives from this text.

It should be noted that *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra* are closer to the Septuagint (LXX) version of Isa 40:15 than to the Masoretic Text (MT) of this verse:

Behold, nations are like a drop from a bucket and they are regarded like dust of a balance. Behold, he [i.e., God] lifts up isles like something small (הן גוים כמר מדלי וכשחק מאזנים נחשבו הן איים כדק יטול).

MT Isa 40:15; trans. A.O.

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- 3 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of *2 Baruch* are from A.F.J. Klijn, trans. and introd., “2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch: (Early Second Century a.d.),” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha I, Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (ed. J.H. Charlesworth; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 621–652.
- 4 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of *4 Ezra* are from B.M. Metzger, trans. and introd., “The Fourth Book of Ezra: (Late First Century a.d.) with the Four Additional Chapters,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha I, Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (ed. J.H. Charlesworth; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 528–555.

Although both the MT and LXX version refer to a drop at the beginning of this verse, only the LXX refers to spittle at the end of this passage. The MT version instead reads כֹּדֵק (“like something small” [often translated as “like dust”]). This reading is supported by 1QIsa^a XXXI11, 15 (כֹּדֵק), by *Tg. Isa.* 40:15 (כֹּדֵקָא [“like chaff”]), and by *Vg. Isa.* 40:15 (*pulvis* [“dust”]). The LXX reading of “like spittle” (ὡς σίελος), being supported by the VL reading *saliva/sputum* (“like spittle”), can be explained as a confusion of the consonants *dalet* and *resh* in Hebrew, of כֹּדֵק with כֹּרֵק (“like spittle”),⁵ perhaps via the word כֹּרֵק (“like something thin”).⁶

The LXX reading could have ended up in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra* in various ways. Presuming a Semitic, probably Hebrew, original for these writings,⁷ the LXX reading could reflect a variant Hebrew reading of Isa 40:15 or may have been included (either intentionally or by misreading the Hebrew original) in the Greek phase of the transmission history of these writings. The same explanation does not have to be true of all three writings. In addition, it is unclear whether these writings knew Isa 40:15 in a version comparable to our current LXX reading or whether they were acquainted with a version comparable to our current MT reading with only the change of כֹּדֵק into כֹּרֵק.⁸ Because of the inclusion of the LXX reading in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra*, I will use the LXX version of Isa 40:15 and its pericope in this paper.

In this contribution, the transformations of Isa 40:15 in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra* will be studied. In particular, I will focus on the transformations concerning content, which I believe to be limited to three aspects: (1) the literary character who utters the comparison; (2) the meaning of the drop and spittle; (3) the identification of the nations, especially to

5 See K. Elliger, *Deuterocesaja I, Jesaja 40,1–45,7* (BKAT 11.1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 1978), 42.

6 There may be a possibility that דֵק and רֵק are also confused in Gen 41:3, 4, 19, 20, 27 (cf. Hans F. Fuhs, דָּקָא *dāqā*, *ThWAT* 2:213, suggesting that דֵקוֹת should be read instead of רֵקוֹת in Gen 41:19, 20, 27).

7 This seems to be generally accepted. See, however, James R. Davila, “(How) Can We Tell If a Greek Apocryphon or Pseudepigraphon Has Been Translated from Hebrew or Aramaic?,” *JSP* 15 (2005): 3–61, here 59. He confesses himself skeptical of the confident and widely accepted claims to have established the original languages (Hebr./Aram.) of works that survive only in secondary and/or tertiary translations. These claims depend on their being translated literally into Greek and then translated slavishly enough into the secondary language so that the Hebraisms and Aramaisms still show through, which is improbable.

8 Interestingly, the passages from *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra* do not mention the isles and their being lifted up (or weighed).

whom they are opposed. I will start with a discussion of LXX Isa 40:15 in its immediate context and will continue with a discussion of the relevant passages in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2Baruch*, and *4Ezra*. In the final section of my contribution, I will briefly reflect on the question of how the diverse reception of Isa 40:15 in these writings may contribute to our understanding of their interrelationship, which has been debated for more than a century since *2Baruch* and *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* were first introduced to the Western world in 1866 and 1898 respectively.⁹

2 The Meaning of LXX Isa 40:15 in Its Immediate Context

Isaiah 40:15 is part of those chapters of Isaiah which are commonly called “Deutero-Isaiah” (Isa 40–55). These chapters are generally believed to be an independent collection of prophecies from an unknown prophet who probably lived in Babylon towards the end of the Babylonian exile. More specifically, Isa 40:15 is part of a disputation between the prophet and the people in Isa 40:12–31 in which the prophet attempts to convince his people that God can and will remember and redeem his exiled people in Babylon. It belongs to a subunit in this disputation (vv. 12–17) that introduces God in a series of questions (part A) and that continues with some conclusions concerning the nations (part B):

- A ¹² Who has measured the water with his hand and heaven with a span and all the earth by handful? Who has weighed the mountains with a scale and the forests with a balance? ¹³ Who has known the mind of the Lord, and who has been his counselor to instruct him? ¹⁴ Or with whom did he consult, and he instructed him? Or who showed him judgment? Or who showed him the way of understanding?
- B ¹⁵ If all the nations have been accounted as a drop from a jar and as the sinking of a balance, they will also be accounted as spittle. ¹⁶ Lebanon is not enough for burning, nor are all the quadrupeds enough for a whole burnt offering. ¹⁷ And all the nations are as nothing, and they have been accounted as nothing.

LXX Isa 40:12–17 NETS

9 Antonio Maria Ceriani, “Apocalypsis Baruch, olim de graeco in syriacum, et nunc de syriaco in latinum translata,” in *Monumenta sacra et profana ex codicibus praesertim Bibliothecae Ambrosianae* 1.2 (Milan: Bibliotheca Ambrosiane Mediolani, 1866), 73–95; Leopold Cohn, “An Apocryphal Work Ascribed to Philo of Alexandria,” *JQR* 10 (1898): 277–332.

The one who utters the comparison in Isa 40:15 is the unknown prophet of Deutero-Isaiah. Although he is not explicitly introduced in Isa 40:12–31, he is probably the speaker as he refers to God in the third person singular and addresses Israel in the second person singular and plural throughout the disputation. However, in our verse he is referring to someone else's perspective on the nations. This is suggested by the use of the verbs ἐλογίσθησαν (“they have been regarded”) and λογισθήσονται (“they will be regarded”) in v. 15. It means that someone, from a certain perspective, regards these nations as a drop from a jar, as the sinking of a balance, and as spittle. Nevertheless, it is not clear whose perspective is alluded to, as v. 15 and its unit (vv. 15–17) do not state *who* regards these nations this way.¹⁰

The drop from a bucket and the spittle refer to the insignificant power of the nations as opposed to the Lord's power and sovereignty. Throughout the disputation between the prophet and the people, God's incomparability is discussed. In vv. 18 and 25 it is explicitly asked with whom God can be compared, but also in vv. 12–14 the rhetorical questions about who created the world and informed the Lord imply that no one can be compared with God.¹¹ In answer to these questions, vv. 15–17 oppose the nations' insignificance to God's power and sovereignty.¹² Unlike God, these nations do not have any power over the world or in history.

The specific identification of these nations, however, poses some difficulty. As for the MT, it is sometimes argued that these nations (גוים) are only the foreign, Gentile nations, whereas elsewhere it is believed that Israel is also

10 In the mt, it is God's perspective that is alluded to. This may be gathered from v. 17 (trans. A.O.): “All the nations are like nothing *before him*; as less than nothing and emptiness they are regarded *by him*” (כל־הגוים כאין נגדו מאפס ותהו נחשבו־לי).

11 There is some discussion concerning the answer to these questions in the mt version, but the issue is also applicable to the lxx. In v. 12, the answer should either be “God” or “no-one” and in vv. 13 and 14 “no-one.” See, e.g., J.L. Koole, trans. and comm., *Jesaja II 1, Jesaja 40 tot en met 48* (COUt; Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1985), 52–53, 55 (“God” in v. 12 and “no-one” in vv. 13 and 14); Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* (trans. Margaret Kohl; ed. Peter Machinist; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 67 (“Yahweh alone” in v. 12 and—somewhat differently—“Cyrus” or “the Servant of the Lord” in vv. 13 and 14); Ulrich Berges, trans. and comm., *Jesaja 40–48* (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 131 (“no-one” in vv. 12, 13 and 14).

12 In the mt, this opposition is explicitly expressed in v. 17, in which both the nations and God are mentioned and in which God regards these nations as less than nothing and emptiness.

included.¹³ The LXX introduces πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (“all the nations”) as the subject of both v. 15 and v. 17. The addition of πάντα (“all”) in πάντα τὰ ἔθνη would suggest that all nations are meant, including Israel, but this does not have to be the case. Elsewhere in LXX Deutero-Isaiah, the same phrase is found in two other passages (43:9; 52:10), both times reflecting מְטִי כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם. In both texts, this phrase probably does not refer to *all* nations, but to the Gentile nations only.¹⁴ The same may be the case in Isa 40:15, because in the context of the disputation of Isa 40:12–31 the prophet has to convince the people that it is not empires like Babylon that wield power but, in fact, God.¹⁵

3 The Reception of Isa 40:15 in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, 2 *Baruch*, and 4 *Ezra*

3.1 *The Reception of Isa 40:15 in Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*

Liber antiquitatum biblicarum is a retelling of Genesis until 1 Samuel and accordingly is an example of that category of texts which is commonly called Rewritten Bible. Isaiah 40:15 is used twice by *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*. The first time, in *L.A.B.* 7:3, it is attested in the retelling of the Tower of Babel episode (*L.A.B.* 6–7). This passage reads “and I will consider them like a drop of water and liken them to spittle (*et tamquam stillicidium arbitror eos, et in sputo approximabo eos/eis*).”¹⁶ The second time, in *L.A.B.* 12:4, it is used in the retelling

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- 13 The commentaries do not always explicitly attempt to identify the nations and the isles. See for the identification of the nations and isles as only the foreign, Gentile nations, e.g., Berges, *Jesaja 40–48*, 139. See for the inclusion of Israel among the nations and isles, e.g., Elliger, *Deuterocesaja I, Jesaja 40,1–45,7*, 55. One should observe that in the mt, the islands (or coastlands) in v. 15 and the Lebanon in v. 16 cannot include Israel, but v. 17 does refer to “all the nations” (כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם).
- 14 Isa 43:9 is part of a trial speech between the Lord and all the nations; in Isa 52:10 it is said that God will reveal his holy arm/salvation of Israel before all the nations/all the ends of the world.
- 15 Cf. Koole, *Jesaja II I, Jesaja 40 tot en met 48*, 57; Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 71 (both about the mt). Cf. also Isa 40:23–24, in which God is described as appointing rulers to rule for naught, as having made the earth as nothing, and as destroying these rulers.
- 16 The reading of *sputo* (“spittle”) is based upon a conjecture for the word *scuto* (“shield”) which is attested in all extant mss. For an extensive justification of this conjecture and the meaning of *approximare* as “to liken” in this context, see Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber antiquitatum biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation* (2 vols.; AGJU 31; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 377–379. To this justification may be added that *sputo* (“spittle”) also better fits the references to the drop of water, flood, and thirst in *L.A.B.* 7:3 than *scuto* (“shield”).

of the golden calf episode (*L.A.B.* 12). There it reads “And the race of men will be to me like a drop from a pitcher and will be reckoned like spittle (*et erit mihi hominum genus tamquam stillicidium urcei, et tamquam sputum estimabitur*).”¹⁷

3.1.1 *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* 7:3

In *L.A.B.* 7:3, God utters the comparison with a drop and with spittle. This differs from the speaker in Isa 40:15 (the anonymous prophet of Deutero-Isaiah) and this change is reflected in the different wording of *L.A.B.* 7:3 when compared with Isaiah. In this passage, the verbs are changed into a first person singular form. In the first part of this verse, the verb *arbitrabor* (“I will consider”) is used instead of Isaiah’s ἐλογίσθησαν (“they are regarded”), whereas the verb *approximabo* (“I will liken”) is used instead of Isaiah’s λογισθήσονται (“they will be regarded”) in the second part. God is the implied subject of both verbs, contrary to “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) in LXX Isa 40:15a.

As for the identification of the nations, *L.A.B.* 7:3–4 contrasts Israel and the rest of humankind. In the Isaianic allusion of *L.A.B.* 7:3, the corresponding element to “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) is “them” (*eos*). This pronoun refers back to the people who built the tower. This would mean that almost all humanity is included, as only twelve people refused to build the tower (*L.A.B.* 6:3). In the next verse however, Abraham is elected by God “before all these men” (*ante omnes hos*), which again refers to the builders of the tower. Israel’s ancestor belonged to the group of people who refused to build the tower (*L.A.B.* 6:3), but Abraham also refused—unlike the eleven other men—to escape to the mountains when they are threatened with being thrown into the fire as punishment for their refusal (*L.A.B.* 6:11). This opposition between Israel, represented by Abraham, and the rest of humanity deviates from the meaning of Isa 40:15 in which the Lord and the nations were opposed to one another.¹⁸

17 Strikingly, the use of Isa 40:15 is not the only connection between the Tower of Babel and golden calf episodes in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*. In the retelling of the golden calf episode, the author explicitly refers to the building of the Tower of Babel: “And while he [i.e., Aaron] was speaking, they [i.e., the people] did not heed him, so that the word spoken in the time when the people sinned by building the tower might be fulfilled, when God said, ‘And now unless I stop them, everything that they will propose to do they will dare, and even worse.’” (*L.A.B.* 12:3). God’s words are a quotation of his words in Gen 11:6, but a similar citation of Gen 11:6 in *L.A.B.* 7:2 is actually used as an intertext for *L.A.B.* 12:3. For more information about the use of Gen 11:6 as a connection between both episodes, see B.N. Fisk, “Scripture Shaping Scripture: The Interpretive Role of Biblical Citations in Pseudo-Philo’s Episode of the Golden Calf,” *JSP* 17 (1998): 3–23, here 15–21.

18 This deviation was already noted by Bruce Norman Fisk, *Do You Not Remember?: Scripture,*

In *L.A.B.* 7:3, the insignificance expressed by the comparison of the builders of the tower with a drop and with spittle indicates the low regard God has for the builders of the tower. This is a future state closely connected to God's intended punishment for these people, as is indicated by the use of the future tenses in this verse. Isaiah 40:15 is used just after the passage in which God announces his punishment of the builders of the tower:

And behold now I will divide up their languages and scatter them in all regions so that a man will not understand his own brother and no one will hear the language of his neighbor. And I will banish them to the cliffs, and they will build for themselves huts with stalks of straw and will dig caves for themselves and live there like the beasts of the field. And thus they will remain before me all the time so that they will never make such plots again, and I will consider them like a drop of water and liken them to spittle. And to some the end will come by water, but others will be dried up with thirst.

L.A.B. 7:3

As a result of God's punishment, the builders of the tower will be literally in a very low state when they cannot understand each other and when they live on cliffs, in huts, and like the beasts of the field. Their deaths by water or thirst seem to flow naturally from this state. This makes clear that *L.A.B.* 7:3 does not so much express Isaiah's contrast between the insignificant power of the nations and God's power and sovereignty, but rather focuses on God's contempt for the builders of the tower after their punishment. They are insignificant, because they are worth nothing to him.

3.1.2 *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* 12:4

Like *L.A.B.* 7:3, God utters the comparison with a drop and with spittle in *L.A.B.* 12:4 instead of the anonymous prophet of Deutero-Isaiah. The different wording of *L.A.B.* 12:4 in comparison to LXX Isa 40:15 reflects this change. In *L.A.B.* 12:4, the corresponding element to the phrase "all the nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) in LXX Isa 40:15—the variation "the race of men" (*hominum genus*)—is still the subject of the verbs. However, the addition of the personal pronoun *mihi* ("to me," i.e., God) in the first part of this verse makes clear that God is uttering the comparison with the drop and spittle.

Story and Exegesis in the Rewritten Bible of Pseudo-Philo (JSPSup 37; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 172 and Jacobson, *A Commentary*, 1:379.

In *L.A.B.* 12:4, “the race of men” (*hominum genus*) is used instead of “all the nations” in Isa 40:15. The interpretation of *hominum genus*, however, poses some difficulty, for God awkwardly moves from an indictment of Israel to an indictment of all humanity in his prediction of his punishment of Israel:

And now I too will forsake them [i.e., Israel], and I will turn again and make peace with them so that a house may be built for me among them, a house that will be destroyed because they will sin against me. And the race of men will be to me like a drop from a pitcher and will be reckoned like spittle.

L.A.B. 12:4

This reference to *hominum genus* could be interpreted as a very limited reference to the Jewish people,¹⁹ but this is unlikely. It is more plausible that the author of *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* sees a special connection between Israel, humanity, and God, in which Israel’s relationship with God affects all humanity, for better or for worse, depending on Israel’s faithfulness to God.²⁰ The same connection is also expressed in *L.A.B.* 44 in which God announces his punishment of another instance of Israel’s apostasy:²¹

⁶ ... the LORD said, “Behold I will root up the earth (*terram*) and destroy the whole human race (*totum genus hominum*), because, when I established laws on Mount Sinai, I showed myself to the sons of Israel in the storm ...²² ⁸ “Therefore, behold I abhor the race of men (*genus hominum*), and I will cut away the root of my creation; and those dying will outnumber those being born, because the house of Jacob has been infected in its wickedness and the impiety of Israel has been multiplied.

L.A.B. 44:6–8

19 See Jacobson, *A Commentary*, 1:489. Jacobson is “unable to explain this [i.e., the reference to *hominum genus*],” but refers to Origen, *Hom. Num.* 7.4.3 in which Origen attempts to show that in Isa 40:15 Israel is included in God’s rejection of all nations.

20 For this interpretation, see Karla R. Suomala, *Moses and God in Dialogue: Exodus 32–34 in Postbiblical Literature* (Studies in Biblical Literature 61; New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 83, 87. See also Fisk, *Do You Not Remember?*, 170–171, extensively discussing the problematic interpretation of *hominum genus*.

21 Fisk also refers to the parallels with *L.A.B.* 44 (Fisk, *Do You Not Remember?*, 170).

22 A description of Israel’s agreement to keep God’s commandments and how they broke these commandments follows.

This means that in *L.A.B.* 12:4 the nations in Isa 40:15 have been interpreted as referring to all nations, including Israel. Any opposition, whether between God and the nations, Israel and the nations, or other, is not made explicit.

As for the meaning of the drop and spittle, they express the low regard God has for the human race after the destruction of the temple due to Israel's sinning. As in *L.A.B.* 7:3, it is a future state closely connected to God's intended punishment for his people. This is indicated by the use of the future tenses in this verse. Isaiah 40:15 is used just after God's prediction of the destruction of the temple due to Israel's sinning in *L.A.B.* 12:4 (cited above). Without the temple and Israel keeping the commandments as a connection between God and humanity, God no longer cares about humankind. As in *L.A.B.* 7:3, this demonstrates that *L.A.B.* 12:4 focuses on God's contempt for the human race after Israel's punishment, instead of expressing Isaiah's contrast between the insignificant power of the nations and God's power and sovereignty. The human race is insignificant, because they are worth nothing to him.

3.2 *The Reception of Isa 40:15 in 2 Bar. 82:4–5*

2 Baruch is an apocalypse, the story of which is set in Palestine in the period just before and just after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the first temple in 587/6 BCE. Our passage belongs to a full quoted letter, which the main character Baruch allegedly sent to the nine and a half tribes across the Euphrates (chs. 78–87).²³ The comparison with a drop and spittle is divided among two verses in ch. 82:

23 It should be pointed out that this letter is transmitted apart from the apocalyptic part of *2 Baruch* in some forty Syriac Old Testaments. However, our only two mss that have preserved the apocalyptic part, the Syriac translation from Codex Ambrosianus (7a1 or c) and an Arabic version from the Arabic Manuscript of Mount Sinai (ms 589), have also included the letter. This state of affairs resulted in discussions concerning the question of whether the epistle originally belonged to *2 Baruch* or not. For an extensive argumentation in favor of an original inclusion, see Pierre Bogaert, introd., trans., and comm., *Apocalypse de Baruch* (2 vols.; SC 144–145; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1969), 2:68–72, 77–78; Matthias Henze, *Jewish Apocalypticism in Late First Century Israel: Reading Second Baruch in Context* (TSAJ 142; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 367–369. For an extensive argumentation contra an original inclusion, see Gwendolyn B. Saylor, *Have the Promises Failed?: A Literary Analysis of 2 Baruch* (SBLDS 72; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 98–101. However, neither argumentation convincingly demonstrates that the letter either had or did not have a different provenance than the apocalypse. In my contribution, this question is not relevant for understanding our passage.

⁴ And we behold the multitude of their power while they act impiously; *but they will be made like a drop* (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ). ⁵ And we see the strength of their power while they resist the Mighty One every hour; *but they will be reckoned like spittle* (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ).

2 Bar. 82:4–5; emphasis A.O.

Both verses are part of a unit in the letter in which Baruch attempts to console the nine and a half tribes by announcing the punishment of the nations for their wicked behavior.

The one who makes the comparison with a drop and spittle is Baruch, as he allegedly writes this letter (cf. *2 Bar.* 82:1 [“My brothers, therefore I have written to you”]). Although Baruch is the speaker instead of the unknown prophet in Isaiah, the situation is similar to that in Isaiah as Baruch also focuses on someone else’s perspective. This is suggested by Baruch’s use of “to reckon” (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ) in v. 5. However, as it does not state *by whom* the nations will be reckoned like spittle, it is difficult to determine whose perspective is alluded to. The subject in the main clauses of vv. 4 and 5, a first person plural, may be included however, because this group of people is presented as seeing the multitude and strength of the nations’ power in these verses.

2 Baruch uses Isaiah in a distinction between a first person plural and a third person plural. These groups of people can be identified as the hostile nations and Israel with the help of the first three verses of ch. 82:

¹ My brothers, therefore I have written to you that you may find consolation with regard to the multitude of tribulations. ² But you ought to know that our Creator will surely avenge us on all our enemies²⁵ according to everything which they have done against us and among us; in particular that the end which the Most High prepared is near, and that his grace is coming, and that the fulfillment of his judgment is not far. ³ For now

24 Interestingly, the Syriac translation in the Codex Ambrosianus (7a1 or c) does not read ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ (“like a drop”) like the Arabic version of the complete *2 Baruch* and the other Syriac mss with only the epistle, but it reads ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܘܢܐ (“like pollution”). However, in the letter the many singular readings of this Syriac translation have to be rejected as being errors of the Syriac copyist (cf. F. Leemhuis, A.F.J. Klijn, and G. j. h. van Gelder, *The Arabic Text of the Apocalypse of Baruch: Edited and Translated with a Parallel Translation of the Syriac Text* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986], 12). In my opinion, this is also the case in our verse.

25 The word “enemies” [ܩܘܪܘܢܐ] is a correction of Klijn’s “brothers”.

we see the multitude of the happiness of the nations although they have acted wickedly; but they are like a vapor.

2 Bar. 82:1–3

Interpreting the first person plural in 2 Bar. 82:4–5 narrowly, it refers back to Baruch and his “brothers,” the exiled nine and a half tribes across the Euphrates in v. 1. However, all Israel may be implied as well, as Baruch, earlier in his letter, writes: “Are we not all, the twelve tribes, bound by one captivity as we also descend from one father?” (2 Bar. 78:4). In this verse, the first person plural clearly encompasses all Israel. The third person plural is paralleled by “the nations” (עַמִּים) in v. 3 and is identified as Israel’s enemies (אֹיְבֵי) in v. 2. They are clearly hostile nations, as Baruch refers to the multitude of tribulations in v. 1 and characterizes these enemies as doing things against and with Israel in v. 2. They may be identified as the Assyrians and the Babylonians, although the actual context of 2 Baruch may suggest the Romans. This means that 2 Baruch diverted from Isaiah’s opposition between God and the nations by contrasting Israel with the nations.

2 Baruch uses the references to a drop and spittle to symbolize the downfall of the nations during God’s final judgment. This differs from Isaiah, in which the insignificant power of the nations is emphasized. In 2 Baruch, the reason for the punishment of the nations is, on the one hand, the mistreatment of Israel, as v. 2 says that God will avenge Israel on all their enemies according to all they have done against and among Israel. On the other hand, some of the actions of the nations described in vv. 3–9 suggest something different:

³ For now we see the multitude of the happiness of the nations *although they have acted wickedly*; but they are like a vapor. ⁴ And we behold the multitude of their power *while they act impiously*; but they will be made like a drop. ⁵ And we see the strength of their power *while they resist the Mighty One every hour*; but they will be reckoned like spittle. ⁶ And we will ponder about the glory of their majesty *while they do not keep the statutes of the Most High*; but as smoke they will pass away. ⁷ And we think about the beauty of their gracefulness *while they go down in impurities*; but like grass which is withering, they will fade away. ⁸ And we ponder about the strength of their cruelty *while they themselves do not think about the end*; but they will be broken like a passing wave. ⁹ And we notice the pride of their power *while they deny the goodness of God by whom it was given to them*; but as a passing cloud they will vanish.

2 Bar. 82:3–9; emphasis A.O.

While “acting wickedly” (עָוָה [“to act wickedly/to do wickedness”]) in v. 3 and “acting impiously” (עָוָה [“to do/treat ill”]) in v. 4 may still be too general in meaning, resisting God, not keeping God’s statutes, going down in impurities, not thinking about the end, and denying God’s goodness suggest that the nations will be punished for not observing some kind of law and for not acknowledging the Lord. Accordingly, the predictions that they will be made like vapor, drop, spittle, smoke, withering grass, a passing wave, and a passing cloud in these verses express that these nations will eventually be punished for their misbehavior with their demise. Despite their current strength, glory, and power, they will eventually turn to insignificance or even disappear.

3.3 The Reception of Isa 40:15 in 4 Ezra 6:56

Like *2 Baruch*, *4 Ezra* is an apocalypse set in Babylon thirty years after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the first temple in 587/6 BCE. Our passage belongs to the third introductory address (*4 Ezra* 6:38–59)²⁶ in which the main character, Ezra, first retells the six days of creation (vv. 38–54) and then accuses God that Israel does not rule the world although the world was created for them (vv. 55–59). The passage itself, *4 Ezra* 6:56, reads in the Latin version “you have said ... that they are like spittle, and you have compared their abundance to a drop from a bucket (*dixisti ... quoniam salivae adsimilatae sunt et sicut stillicidium de uaso similasti habundantiam eorum*).”²⁷

26 *4 Ezra* can be divided into seven units: I—*4 Ezra* 3:1–5:20; II—*4 Ezra* 5:21–6:34; III—*4 Ezra* 6:35–9:25; IV—*4 Ezra* 9:26–10:59; V—*4 Ezra* 11:1–12:51; VI—*4 Ezra* 13:1–58; VII—*4 Ezra* 14:1–48. The first four units start with an introductory address by Ezra, units IV and V start with a vision, and unit VII starts with a speech of God, addressed to Ezra.

27 This reading is confirmed by the other important witness to *4 Ezra*, the Syriac translation, which only has ܫܠܝܘܐ (“you have compared them”) instead of *adsimilatae sunt* (“they are like”). The Ethiopic, Armenian, and Arabic mss are similar to the Syriac and Latin translations or are based upon a misreading of the (hypothetical) Greek *Vorlage*. For a convenient overview of the various ancient translations, see Bruno Violet, *Die Esra-Apokalypse (Iv. Esra) I, Die Überlieferung* (GCS 18; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1910), 124. Only one Arabic ms, the one published by Ewald (H.G.A. Ewald, *Das vierte Ezrabuch: Nach seinem Zeitalter, seinen arabischen Übersetzungen und einer neuen Wiederherstellung* [Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen 11; Göttingen: Dieterichs, 1863]), reads “dust” instead of “spittle” and would thus have preserved mt Isa 40:15. However, the Ewald Arabic ms is regarded as a reworked version of the Greek (cf. Michael Edward Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* [ed. Frank Moore Cross; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990], 6) and may accordingly have adjusted the text to mt Isa 40:15. In this paper, I will use the Latin version.

The comparison with a drop and spittle is used in a quotation of God's words by Ezra. This means that, although Ezra is the speaker instead of the unknown prophet in Isa 40:15, the situation is similar as both passages focus on someone else's perspective. In *4 Ezra* 6:56, two changes to the Isaianic text stress that God is being quoted. The addition of the phrase *dixisti ... quoniam* ("you have said ... that") indicates that the comparison with spittle and with a drop from a bucket is part of God's words quoted in indirect speech. The word *similasti* ("you have compared") underlines that the comparison is God's, which means that Ezra focuses on God's perspective.

Presenting the comparison with a drop and spittle as a quotation of God's words fits the context of the third introductory address very well. Before his accusation of God, Ezra retells the six days of creation (6:38–54; cf. Gen 1). In this retelling, he stresses that it was carried out by divine speech, as God is described as saying or commanding the works of creation on each day. In addition, Ezra makes clear that every work of creation had a purpose, culminating in the statement that God placed Adam as a ruler over all the works he had made (v. 54).²⁸ In his accusation of God after this retelling, Ezra further emphasizes God's word and stresses that the world's purpose was its possession by Israel (vv. 55, 59):

55 All this I have spoken before you, O Lord, because *you have said* that it was for us that you created this world. 56 As for the other nations which have descended from Adam, *you have said* that they are nothing, and that they are like spittle, and you have compared their abundance to a drop from a bucket. 57 And now, O Lord, behold, these nations, which are reputed as nothing, domineer over us and devour us. 58 But we your people, whom *you have called* your first-born, only begotten, zealous for you, and most dear, have been given into their hands. 59 If the world has indeed been created for us, why do we not possess our world as an inheritance? How long will this be so?

4 Ezra 6:55–59; emphasis A.O.

Contrary to the creation account, Israel's exilic situation does *not* conform to God's word and purpose. As a result, God's powerful word in the events of creation contrasts with God's impotent word with respect to Israel. If God himself has said that the world is created for Israel, that the nations are like

28 For the "divine speech" and "purpose" themes in *4 Ezra* 6:38–54, see, e.g., Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 182–183.

nothing, and that Israel has a special relationship with him, God must either have good reasons for not keeping his promise or be impotent in his cosmic sovereignty.²⁹

4 Ezra uses the comparison with a drop and spittle in a distinction between the nations and Israel. This distinction bothers Ezra very much in the first three units of *4 Ezra*. In these units the assumptions underlying Ezra's laments and questions are similar to those of E.P. Sanders' "covenantal nomism."³⁰ This results in the importance of the topic of the one versus the many, i.e., the situation of Israel versus the situation of the other nations. Ezra feels that Israel's exilic situation is unfair, because it does not conform to the superiority of Israel over the other nations which God's election of Israel and his gift of the law brought about (cf., e.g., *4 Ezra* 3:28–36; 4:22–25; 5:28–29). This concern with the unfair representation of the one-many opposition is also expressed in *4 Ezra* 6:55–59 (cited above). On the one hand, the relationship with God is part of this opposition, as Israel—not the nations—has a special relationship with God (v. 58). On the other hand, the dominion of the world is part of this opposition, as the nations—not Israel—rule the world (v. 57), even though God had promised Israel possession of it (v. 59). This means the author of *4 Ezra* interpreted the reference to the nations in Isa 40:15 as if it referred to the Gentiles, although he did not use Isaiah's opposition between God and the nations.

In this context, the comparisons to a drop from a bucket and to spittle show that the nations are worth nothing to God. The addition of the phrases "they are nothing" in v. 56 and "which are reputed as nothing" in v. 57, which may be an allusion to Isa 40:17 (MT: "All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness"; LXX: "And

29 For the contrast between Ezra's retelling of the six days of creation in vv. 38–54 and his accusation of God in vv. 55–59, see Bruce W. Longenecker, *2 Esdras* (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 38.

30 For this identification, see Karina Martin Hogan, *Theologies in Conflict in 4 Ezra: Wisdom Debate and Apocalyptic Solution* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 130; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 36. According to Sanders (E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [London: SCM Press, 1977], 422), the "pattern" or "structure" of covenantal nomism can be summarized as follows: "(1) God has chosen Israel and (2) given the law. The law implies both (3) God's promise to maintain the election and (4) the requirement to obey. (5) God rewards obedience and punishes transgression. (6) The law provides for means of atonement, and atonement results in (7) maintenance or re-establishment of the covenantal relationship. (8) All those who are maintained in the covenant by obedience, atonement and God's mercy belong to the group which will be saved."

all the nations are as nothing, and they have been accounted as nothing”), underscores this worthlessness. Unlike Israel, these nations do not have a special relationship with God. Whereas Israel is called God’s first-born, only begotten, zealous for God, and most dear in v. 58 (Lat.), the Gentiles are nothing, compared to spittle and a drop from a bucket, and reputed as nothing in vv. 56–57. Although the nations are still descendants of Adam (vv. 54, 56), they have ceased to count in God’s eyes and therefore should not rule the world. In this way *4 Ezra* differs from Isa 40:15, which expressed the insignificant power of the nations as opposed to the Lord’s power and sovereignty.

3.4 Conclusion

The results of the preceding discussion may be summarized in the following overview:

	Isa 40:15	<i>L.A.B.</i> 7:3	<i>L.A.B.</i> 12:4	<i>2 Bar.</i> 82:4–5	<i>4 Ezra</i> 6:56
<i>the one uttering the comparison</i>	the unknown prophet, referring to someone else’s perspective	God	God	Baruch, referring to someone else’s perspective	Ezra quoting God
<i>the meaning of the drop from the bucket and spittle</i>	insignificant power in contrast to God’s power	low regard resulting from punishment	low regard resulting from punishment	demise resulting from punishment	worthlessness due to no special relationship with God
<i>the identification of the nations</i>	Gentiles	all humanity minus one (Abraham)	all humanity	(hostile) Gentiles	Gentiles
<i>and to whom they are opposed</i>	God	Israel	–	Israel	Israel

This overview shows that *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra* all gave new meanings to the comparison with a drop and spittle in their reception of Isa 40:15, but in different ways. *2 Baruch* differs from all the other

passages as it is the only passage in which God is not the one who utters (or is quoted as having uttered) the comparison. *2Baruch* and *4Ezra* differ from the two passages in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* in that they do not interpret the references to the drop and the spittle as symbols of low regard resulting from God's punishment, but as representing the coming demise of the hostile nations when God punishes them and the nations' worthlessness due to their lack of a special relationship with God respectively. *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* 12:4 differs from all the other passages by being the only passage in which the nations are understood as all of humanity, with no opposition made explicit. Despite these differences, however, it should be pointed out that all three writings share the formal characteristics of using the imagery of a drop and spittle in a comparison with people and signifying something disparaging with it.

4 The Relationship between *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2Baruch*, and *4Ezra*

This diverse reception of Isa 40:15 raises the question of whether it may contribute to our understanding of the interrelationship between *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2Baruch*, and *4Ezra*.

In the past, it has been suggested that one or two of these writings could be somehow dependent upon one or both of the other writings. The younger writing(s) could have used the older one(s) as a source³¹ or could have been written as a reaction to it.³² However, arguing in favor of any direct dependence is very difficult and depends on one's assessment of the specificity of the verbal, stylistic, structural, and narrative similarities, the theological parallels, and the common traditions in these three writings. Complicating factors, for example, are the difficulties in dating and locating these texts, their compositional and transmission histories, the differences in genre, possible developments of certain ideas over time, and the influence of the translators.

I believe that the diverse reception of Isa 40:15 cannot convincingly demonstrate any literary dependence of one writing upon the other. As explained above, none of these writings are completely similar in the way they interpreted

31 See more recently, e.g., Fisk, *Do You Not Remember?*, 37.

32 See, e.g., John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 224 (only about *2Baruch* and *4Ezra*).

this verse. In addition, none of them referred to the drop from a bucket and spittle in the same way. In both passages of *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* the drop from a bucket and spittle are mentioned in the same order as in Isaiah, but they switched positions in *4 Ezra* and are divided over two verses in *2 Baruch*. Besides, the bucket is not mentioned in *L.A.B.* 7:3 and *2 Baruch*. Moreover, the contexts in which Isa 40:15 was used are not similar. In *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, it is attested in the Tower of Babel and the golden calf episodes, whereas *4 Ezra* used this passage in an accusation of God and *2 Baruch* in a prediction of the destruction of the hostile Gentiles during God's judgment. These arguments are probably not decisive evidence against a (literary) dependence of one writing upon the other, but it does make such a dependence appear less likely.

The diverse reception of Isa 40:15 better supports the view that these writings have a similar background.³³ They may have influenced each other at a certain point in history, but their exact relationship is of secondary importance. One is left with the impression that the use of Isaiah's imagery of a drop and spittle in a comparison with people was a common expression in the context from which *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra* originated. On the one hand, the use of this comparison from Isaiah is only attested in these three writings, whereas on the other hand there are both differences and similarities in their interpretation of this verse. This means that Isaiah's imagery could probably be used in different situations, and therefore be differently interpreted, with the only restrictions that it should be used in a comparison with people and express something disparaging. However, this flexibility in the use of Isaiah's imagery of a drop and spittle in a comparison with people also makes it difficult to establish the *exact* interrelationship between these three writings and the *exact* background from which they originated. Such a case may be constructed on other, more solid bases. At the very most, the diverse reception of Isa 40:15 only indicates that these writings had a common background.

33 This is the view found in the most recent commentaries on these writings. See Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 42; Jacobson, *A Commentary*, 1:201; Henze, *Jewish Apocalypticism*, 181–186 (only about *2 Baruch* and *4 Ezra*).