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**“Avelei Tsiyon - אבלי ציון
Light on the Enigmatic Mourners for the Fall of Jerusalem”**

Konstantinos Th. Zarras³⁹

The Second Temple Period (515 BCE – 70 CE) was a time filled by sects, schisms, and a continuous contest for authenticity.⁴⁰ With the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices, as well as with a deeper understanding of the Rabbinic texts, we have now a better view on ancient Judaism.⁴¹ Needless to say, especially in light of the so-called “Enochic Judaism,”⁴² who came only lately under the scope of the academic community, there is a lot more to learn. Now and then, mysterious mentions on obscure groups of people increase this uncertainty even more. One of them is the least investigated “Avelei Tsiyon.” Of course, there is a reason for this abstention on the side of scholars, since the sources behave quite similarly: they mostly avoid or even totally ignore them. This brief article analyzes the “Avelei Tsiyon” in their own context of ancient Judaism, examining Biblical, Rabbinic, and other Jewish texts, whether more or less clear on them or just through a nuance.

Terms and meanings

This Hebrew phrase, *Avelei Tsiyon* (אבְּלֵי צִיּוֹן), translates as the “Mourners in Zion” and appears in various ancient Jewish texts with substantial insinuations in historical, theological, and liturgical context. As the phrase reveals, the Avelei Tsiyon were often related to expressions of grief, fasting, and mourning for the loss of Zion; namely, for the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and for

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⁴⁰ On this tumultuous period, see see Konstantinos Zarras, *History of the New Testament Era: 515 BC – 135 AD*, Ennoia, Athens 2015 (in Greek), esp. pp. 75-79, 141 ff., 191-195, 225-227, 280 ff., 298 ff., 433 ff. Idem, *Ancient Judaism: Studies I*, Ennoia, Athens 2011, esp. pp. 11-17 (in Greek).

⁴¹ Our view on ancient Judaism has changed to a large degree in the last 75 years of research. And it still does. The incorporation of intertestamental texts, of sectarian works, as much as Rabbinic, Gnostic, and mystical writings, offer a dearth of material that it will take decades to study carefully and then to evaluate properly. For an example of the above mentioned, see what a deeper view in the Gospels can do, when done through ancient Judaic lenses, in my *Jewish Readings of Gospel Passages: Jesus and the Calyx of Ancient Judaism*, Ennoia, Athens 2021 (in Greek), esp. pp. 45 ff., 81 ff., 87 ff.

⁴² On this very important aspect of Second Temple Judaism, see Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways Between Qumran and Enochic Judaism*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1998. John Reeves, “Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Manichaean Literature: The Influence of the Enochic Library,” in J. Reeves (ed.), *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, Scholars, Atlanta 1994, 173-203.

the withdrawal of the Presence of God.⁴³ Thus, the Avelei Tsiyon were groups of ascetics centered in Jerusalem, where they flourished, who fasted and mourned for the loss of Jerusalem and its temple and prayed for the redemption of the people of Israel and the return to Zion.⁴⁴ The fact that Jerusalem remained mostly unavailable to the Jews for quite some time, since they returned freely there after the Arab conquest in the seventh century CE, and that references to these groups insist in time, transforms the Avelei Tsiyon into a concept half legendary and half real, and similar to the “thirty-six tzaddikim”⁴⁵ or the Asideans (Hasidim)⁴⁶ from the times of the Maccabees. Importantly, this concept plays a pivotal role in the understanding and the reception of Jerusalem’s destruction and the collective memory within Jewish tradition. As we see in many passages, even in the Gospels, in ancient Judaism this idea and practice were part of a wider lamentation tradition that served as both a religious expression of grief⁴⁷ and a theological reflection on divine justice and the subsequent fate of the Jewish people.

Instances from the Old Testament

Although the phrase “Avelei Tsiyon” appears only once in the Hebrew Bible, the motifs of mourning⁴⁸ for the loss (or for the impending loss) of Zion are deeply embedded in prophetic texts and later liturgical practices. Thus, mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem and Zion is a recurring theme. Of course, Jerusalem is the city of God and the temple is the house of his great Name on earth.⁴⁹ An actual temporal and spatial *axis mundi* for ancient Israel. Now and then, some of the prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, utter vivid laments over the fate of Jerusalem and its people. Of course, especially the Book of Lamentations and Psalms 74 and 79 are thought to be *qinot* (elegies) for the loss of the temple and “the city of God.”

⁴³ On the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE, see my *History of the New Testament Era: 515 BC – 135 AD*, 569 ff. (in Greek).

⁴⁴ Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture*, Oxford University Press 2004, 125.

⁴⁵ On the legend of the thirty-six righteous men, the pillars of the universe, according to God’s wish, see relevant chapter in Konstantinos Zarras, *Talmud*, Ennoia, Athens 2015, 315-318 (in Greek).

⁴⁶ On the Asideans (Ασιδαιοι for the LXX) and their role in the Maccabean revolt, see Konstantinos Zarras, *History of the New Testament Era: 515 BC – 135 AD*, 202 - 204 (in Greek).

⁴⁷ E.g., see Matt. 9:23 and Mk 5:38.

⁴⁸ The first instance of mourning in the Old Testament is in Gen 23:2, when Abraham mourned for his wife Sarrah.

⁴⁹ The temple in Jerusalem was thought to be the place where God touched the earth, the center of his Presence in the land and a source of protection and abundant blessings for the people of Israel. On the two temples (rather, three, with king Herod’s extensive works) in the “city of God,” see Konstantinos Zarras, *History of the New Testament Era: 515 BC – 135 AD*, 241 - 251 (in Greek).

Thus, the phrase אֲבֵלֵי צִיּוֹן, “mourners in Zion” or “those who mourn in Zion,” appears in Isaiah 61:3 in the context of a new, restored Israel. Yet, though they mourn, they will be blessed by God and they will be called “oaks of righteousness,” “plant of God,” builders and restorers (Is 61:4). Perhaps, Isaiah 40:1-2 refers to them, too. There we see the prophet calling for relief for the people of God and for Jerusalem, because the city has served her term, having received by the hand of Lord a double portion for her sins. The meaning here is that even though the people have sinned, God still thinks them as of His own; though they have been brought captives away from Jerusalem, in Babylonia, God still cares for them.⁵⁰ The double call in Is 40:1, to “Comfort, oh comfort my people,” is addressed to the well-known mourners⁵¹ who were summoned upon the passing of a person.⁵² So, these verses in Isaiah are a call to these mourners, the *Avelei Tsiyon*, also referring to the grief of the people of Israel and to the vision of eventual restoration.

Though not mentioned by this phrase, these people might be implied also in Ezek 24:16-18, a rare instance in prophetic literature (since a brief look to the psychology of a prophet in such a time), when God asks from the prophet not to follow their grievous ways for the death of his beloved wife. After a series of public symbolic acts, Ezekiel is told not to mourn for the loss of his wife publicly as a contrast to the collective mourning that the people of Jerusalem would experience after the destruction of the temple of Solomon in 586 BCE. Often in the Book of Ezekiel, elsewhere too, Jerusalem is personified and presented as a woman and as an unfaithful wife.⁵³

There is no doubt that the Book of Lamentations is devoted to mourning for the loss of Jerusalem and therefore it is the most thorough source on the subject in the whole Bible. Herein one finds the collective sorrow for the loss of the first temple in 586 BCE, for the captivity and the forced expulsion of the people of Israel that followed. Although the exact phrase and the group of *Avelei Tsiyon* are not to be found in the book, their presence is clearly meant, setting the foundation for the mourning of Zion. The personification of Jerusalem and the presence of a collective body of mourners, speaking in one voice, is clear from the very first verse of Lamentations, “How lonely sits the city that was full of people!” (Lam 1:1). This verse, as all the book, sums up the grief of the

⁵⁰ This is the spirit prevailing in the Book of the prophet Ezekiel. His book starts with an impressive vision of God in the lands of captivity, proving that God has not abandoned his people, but still follows and supports them. Ezekiel’s restoration theology is based on the same premise.

⁵¹ See 2 Chron 35:25; Jer 16:16; Ezek 14:17.

⁵² See also Mk 5:38; Jn 11:33 on collective mourning.

⁵³ See Ezek ch. 16; Hos ch. 1-3; Is 8:5-8. Ch. 49-54. 66:7-14; Jer ch. 1-3.

supposed viewer and speaker that is the group called Avelei Tsiyon. Yet, Eliezer Diamond in his very interesting *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture*, does not go back in the Old Testament and mentions the *pherushim* (see next unit) and the *maamadot* as antecedents of the Avelei Tsiyon.⁵⁴ The *maamadot*⁵⁵ were an important “institution” consisting of men who fasted to avert great catastrophes on Israel. The Avelei Tsiyon not only fasted for these reasons, but they also mourned and prayed for the future redemption of their people.⁵⁶

From a theological point of view, in the above examined texts, grief, sorrow and mourning are closely related to loss, repentance and restoration. Loss and destruction are perceived as a proper punishment for leaving the Torah, for abandoning the commandments and following foreign cults. Yet, they are also a way of educating Israel. Thus, the mourning of Zion is portrayed as an acceptance of divine punishment after introspection and as a hope and a call for future redemption. Therefore, the Avelei Tsiyon come as a collective voice representing the people of Israel who accept their broken state and their sentence, but who still cry and long for God’s mercy and future restoration.

Instances from the Talmud

The concept of Avelei Tsiyon as a mourning community is also found in the Talmud. There, they form a more official group that follows these practices, with the added element of asceticism. It is significant that the Avelei Tsiyon are closely related to the grievous observances for the 9th of the month Av (Tisha b’Av), the Jewish day of mourning, commemorating the destruction of both the first and second temple in Jerusalem (586 BCE by the Babylonians⁵⁷ and 70 CE by the Romans⁵⁸ respectively). The clearest reference is in the Bavli, in the Tractate Baba Bathra 60b, where a rabbi, Joshua ben Hananiah, starts a conversation with them. The context is the aftermath of the second loss of the temple and the Bavli speaks for large numbers in Israel who then turned ascetics, “binding themselves neither to eat meat nor to drink wine.” As ascetics, initially here they are called “separated ones” (*pherushin* - פרושין). The term is used in its wider meaning, of a group of people

⁵⁴ Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture*, 125.

⁵⁵ In the Mishnah (Ta’anit 4:3) the members of the *maamad* fasted from Monday to Thursday and called others to do so (see also jTa’anit 4:3 68b). In Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture*, 102-103.

⁵⁶ El. Diamond, as above.

⁵⁷ On the subject, see Konstantinos Th. Zarras, *History of the New Testament Era: 515 BC – 135 AD*, 52 - 65 (in Greek).

⁵⁸ On this final destruction of the temple, as above, 569 – 571.

who distance themselves from a larger majority, now to follow different or stricter practices. The Essenes who left for settling at Dead Sea were true pherushin, after this meaning of the term. Actually, this is the term used for the Pharisees,⁵⁹ too, in the Gospels,⁶⁰ but here it means true asceticism. It is rabbi Joshua who tries to persuade them not to follow extreme fasting practices and it is in the course of this dialogue that they are designated as “mourners in Zion” (אבלי ציון).⁶¹ Probably, following customs of older Jewish sects, they exposed their pain and grief openly, as if seeking a response from heaven. As is known, after the final failed attempt to escape the Roman rule, with the Bar Kochba revolt (132 – 135 CE),⁶² Jews could visit Jerusalem only in the dark day of the 9th of Av. So, the emergence of this group of mourners, after these specific characteristics, should be traced in the immediate period after the final destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

The tragic and repeated loss of the Jerusalem temple is mentioned in other Talmudic Tractates, too. bBerakhot 3a, bYoma 9b, and bTaanit 29a are such instances, where the causes of the destruction and the effect on the Israelites are discussed in dialogues between rabbis. Mourning practices are mentioned, and the people behind them, like the Avelei Tsiyyon, are insinuated. In bBerakhot 3a we find the element of collective mourning and the relative observances to be kept until the arrival of the messiah. Similarly, in bYoma 9b various elements of mourning are discussed, like open, communal grief and fasting. Collective mourning is thought to be a necessary phase in the larger process of repentance and healing, at the completion of which a new temple is risen and the glory of God rests again in her mundane abode. In bTaanit 29a a similar instance is found, where both personal and collective grief is displayed for the loss of the temple of Jerusalem. Thus, these instances in the Talmud present mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem as an important element in the greater process of final restoration. Expressing grief openly, both individually and collectively, shows a deep spiritual connection to Zion and to the land in general. Thus, the act of mourning by the Avelei Tsiyyon is not only a manifestation of grief, but also historical witness and proof for repentance and for the inextinguishable hope in the heart of a people who lost everything. In the centuries to come and especially in the mystical trends of Judaism, this longing for

⁵⁹ See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* l3.171-173, referring to events that took place approximately between 152-142 BCE.

⁶⁰ On the Pharisees, see as above, 436 – 451.

⁶¹ See bBaba Bathra 60b.

⁶² This was the last attempt to free the Holy Land from the Romans. Its leader, Bar Kochba, was even invested by the great Rabbi Akiva with messianic traits and powers. On the subject, see as above, 583 – 597.

mending an ancient wound will reach the universal proportions of tikkun ha-olam⁶³ (restoration of the world). And the Avelei Tsiyyon shall be the ancient messengers for the healing of the land.

Therefore, it is evinced that in ancient Judaism, especially after 70 CE, the notion of Avelei Tsiyyon was integrated to the theology of the temple and Jerusalem, with a strong social echo. Those who mourned for Zion came not only from the leading Sadducees or the Pharisees, but from the simple-minded am ha-arets, too. These Avelei voiced the agony, the fear and the hopes and wishes of the laymen, too, as they found themselves in a templeless and devastated land. Before 70 CE, the priests, the kohanim, and especially the high priest, prayed and mourned for the sins of Israel. In the day of Yom Kippur,⁶⁴ through an intricate ritual, the high priest atoned for his own sins and for the transgressions of his people. They were all responsible for keeping the temple and the land pure for the Presence of God. Yet, after the destruction, the sacrificial cult was annulled and the priesthood went homeless. The first to mourn would have been them. Many others followed in what came to be a communal practice. Fasting and lamentation became public acts for an evil that hit twice. The sense of guilt and shame should have been difficult to bear. Thus, the Avelei Tsiyyon became a strong unifying factor, an expression of shared sorrow, both past and present, bringing together many different clusters of people in the common prayer for hope, atonement, and renewal.

References in liturgical texts

According to the Jewish tradition, both destructions of the Jerusalem temple took place in the 9th of the month Av (Tisha b'Av). That is why the element of mourning is found time and again in Jewish prayers, liturgy, and rituals related to the painful event. The presence of the Avelei Tsiyyon (either real or imaginary) is mentioned or insinuated in several rituals and prayers. They are also mentioned (“mourners of Zion,” “mourners of Jerusalem”) in the *Halakhot Kezuvot* (9th cent. CE) in a prayer of comfort that found its way to *Nahem*, during the afternoon service in the Tisha b'Av.⁶⁵ They are insinuated in the *Musaf* (מוסף) part of the Standing Prayer or Silent Prayer (Amidah),⁶⁶

⁶³ This is a doctrine that will reach universal, even mythical, proportions later in mystical Judaism and especially, in the Kabbalah of Yitzhak Luria.

⁶⁴ On the importance of this day, see Konstantinos Th. Zarras, *History of the New Testament Era: 515 BC – 135 AD*, 275 - 276 (in Greek).

⁶⁵ See relevant article, ‘Avelei Tsiyyon,’ by Zvi Avneri in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

⁶⁶ On the Amidah, see Konstantinos Th. Zarras, *History of the New Testament Era, Vol. II: Jews and Christians in Search of Boundaries*, Ennoia, Athens 2008, 254 - 258 (in Greek).

too. This was the prayer or blessing added on certain holy days and the Sabbaths.⁶⁷ Initially, it was offered as an addition to the morning sacrifices, but after the destruction of the temple it replaced them.⁶⁸ There, in a collective act of expressing grief and mourning, they raise a petition to God for easing the pain for the loss of Jerusalem and Zion. More than that, as a distant echo of Ezekiel's restoration theology, they pray in hope for the coming back of God's Presence, protection, and blessing to Jerusalem. Another set of prayers where the Avelei Tsiyon are insinuated are the penitential *Selikhot* (סליחות). These were additional prayers recited in the fast days and Yom Kippur. Their core is found in Ex 34:6-7, where the thirteen attributes of God are enumerated. They were recited in the days preceding the 9th of Av, where mourning for the loss of Jerusalem and Zion. Again, God's mercy is asked and the hope for restoring Jerusalem is painfully expressed. Still, the same spirit pervades the *Qinot*, a set of dirges or elegies, mentioned in 2 Sam 1:17 and Jer 9:16-17 (where "dirge-singers" are mentioned). All the book of Lamentations is characterized as qinot, too. Authors of such poetical compositions (*piyyutim*) were the famous Judah Halevi and Eleazar Kallir. On the 9th of Av, in deeply grievous emotions, seating down on the floor of the synagogue and in the light of kindles, these qinot were recited. Lament and hope for the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple prevail here, too, as the reciters act in the very same spirit of the Avelei Tsiyon. Meir ben Isaac, who lived in Germany, a great liturgical poet and contemporary of the prominent Talmudist Rashi, was one of the Avelei Tsiyon.⁶⁹

Therefore, the ritual and poetical constructs of mourning, grief, and hope are also invested with deep theological meaning. The people behind them echoed not only the loss of temple and Zion, they did not only ask for help and redemption, but they also cried high for the blight of a continuous exile and punishment; not only for a temple-less, but also for a landless, homeless people dispersed in the various nations on earth. Thus, the Avelei Tsiyon can also be seen as grim poets, grievous for a lost city and an absent Presence.

Obscure from start to finish

Faithful to their past, the future of Avelei Tsiyon is steeped in shadows. Avoiding commerce, they lived in utter poverty, depended wholly on charities coming from pilgrims and various

⁶⁷ Apart from the daily morning and afternoon sacrifices that were offered in the temple, additional offerings were demanded on Sabbaths and on the three festivals of pilgrimage (Num 28-29). See relevant entry of Zvi Avneri in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

⁶⁸ See bBerakhot 26b. bYoma 33a.

⁶⁹ See Zvi Avneri, as above.

communities in the Diaspora.⁷⁰ Sometimes they became subject to harsh criticism and ridicule for these choices. Since he admires and speaks highly of them, the author of *Pesikhta Rabbati* might have been one of them. As written there, the Avelei Tsiyon arised early each morning and prayed for the redemption of Israel.⁷¹ Some of the Karaites⁷² who came to Jerusalem in the early 9th century CE accepted most of their customs. Actually, it is believed that Karaites emigrated there to join their ranks⁷³ and that they were “drawn to this type of ascetic mourning.”⁷⁴ It is impressive that some of their intellectuals, like Sahl ben Mazliah and Daniel al-Qumisi, invited Karaites from other places to abandon everything, to settle in Jerusalem and devote their whole life in prayer for the restoration of Zion.⁷⁵

After the Seljuks took Jerusalem, and especially after the conquest of the city by Crusaders in 1099,⁷⁶ they vanish from Palestine.⁷⁷ However, the hypothesis that the Avelei Tsiyyon were Karaitic in origin cannot be true, since they existed long before the appearance of Karaites.⁷⁸ Kaufmann Kohler⁷⁹ in one of his articles presents material that connects them to the Karaites that left Jerusalem after its conquest by the Crusaders. Then, they went to Constantinople and took this name for themselves. He also presents material, dubious again, based on the writings of Benjamin of Tudela, who went to Jerusalem in 1179 and spoke with one of them, the ascetic saint R. Abraham Alconstantini.⁸⁰ Benjamin presents about such groups dressed in black, with the same name in Yemen in southern Arabia, too.⁸¹ They lived in caves, fasted all days except Sabbath, abstained from wine

⁷⁰ See entry, ‘Avelei Tsiyyon,’ by Zvi Avneri in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

⁷¹ Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 125.

⁷² ‘Karaites’ is the Biblicist of the literalist. A group of Jews that separated themselves from the vaster Rabbinic movement in the Babylonia of the 8th century CE and followed a religion of their own. They developed a nomism apart from the Talmud and the authority of the Rabbis, claiming originality and ancestors like the Qumran covenanters. According to rabbinic sources, their founder was Anan ben David, who failed to become Gaon, exilarch, and that is why he created this sect. They flourished between 9th and 11th cent., but after the Crusades they moved mostly to Byzantium. Karaites survive even today in Israel and other countries.

⁷³ Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 126.

⁷⁴ Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 125.

⁷⁵ Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 126. See also Zvi Avneri, as above.

⁷⁶ After their victory over the Byzantine forces at Manzikert in 1071, the Seljuks created the sultanate of Rum and expanded south. They conquered the Holy Land and Jerusalem and disrupted the pilgrim routes. They kept Jerusalem until 1098, when the Fatimids returned. The city was regained by the Crusaders in 1099.

⁷⁷ See entry, ‘Avelei Tsiyyon,’ by Zvi Avneri in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

⁷⁸ See Zvi Avneri, as above.

⁷⁹ See his entry ‘Abele Zion’ in *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

⁸⁰ See Zvi Avneri, as above.

⁸¹ See Zvi Avneri, as above.

and meat, and prayed for the restoration of Israel. The plot thickens as they were called Rechabites.⁸² Information, yet scant, appears for the existence of Avelei Tsiyyon in Yemen, other places in the East, and also in Italy and Germany.

Concluding remarks

The complex concept of the Avelei Tsiyyon constitutes a very old historical, cultural, ritualistic, and theological presence, referring to Jewish mourning customs and practices related to the destruction of the first and the second temple in Jerusalem. Rooted in the Old Testament, in the Talmud, and in Jewish liturgical practices, they present messianic and mystical traits, too, embodying and voicing the communal mourning for a terrible loss. A loss still painfully present in the psyche of the Jews. After all, mourning had been a medium through which ancient Jewish ecstasies and mystics found their way to heaven while alive. In the Book of Daniel, the prophet fasts and mourns before the vision (Dan 10:2-3) and in the Syriac Book of Baruch (2 Bar 9:2) the hero does the same.⁸³ Similar traits are found in the Enochic corpus, too.⁸⁴ The Avelei Tsiyyon as a concept seem to emerge also related to mourning rituals for the fast day of Tisha b'Av. In time, the destruction of the temples became a central one in Jewish thought and it was invested with symbolical meaning; the same happened with the exile, too. Thus, the Avelei Tsiyyon are seen as a body of acting individuals or as a vibrant -though enigmatic- spiritual community in Jewish life not only expressing collective grief, but also longing for future restoration on all levels. Needless to say, the temple and the city of Jerusalem, not to mention all the people of Israel, lied at the core of their interest.

It is hoped that in this brief inquiry (since sources are not so revealing and studies are far from abounding) some light is shed and a bit more understanding is offered concerning the shadowy Avelei Tsiyyon, as they voiced many in grief and hope for the restoration of Zion. Thus, the often so familiar wish, "Next year to Jerusalem," might carry something of their zeal and memory, too.

⁸² See Kaufmann Kohler, as above. The Rechabites were a clan of fervent anti-Baalists, led by Jehonadab, son of Rechab (9th c. BCE). They existed in the times of the prophet Jeremiah, who held them high because of their discipline (see Jer 35).

⁸³ See my *The Ancient Jewish Mystical Tradition of the Throne*, Typophilia, Thesaloniki 2000, 183 (in Greek).

⁸⁴ See, e.g., 2 Enoch 1:3 (as above).

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