

The Fall of Jerusalem and the Rise of the Torah

Edited by

Peter Dubovský, Dominik Markl,
and Jean-Pierre Sonnet

Mohr Siebeck

PETER DUBOVSKÝ, born 1965; 1999 SSL; 2005 ThD; currently dean at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and professor of the Old Testament and history.

DOMINIK MARKL, born 1979; taught at Heythrop College (University of London), at Hekima College (Nairobi, Kenya) and at Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley (California); currently Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

JEAN-PIERRE SONNET, born 1955; taught at the Jesuit School of Theology in Brussels and at the Centre Sèvres in Paris; currently Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

ISBN 978-3-16-154054-7

ISSN 0940-4155 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament)

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was printed by Gulde Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

Preface

The conception of the present volume – and of the conference from which it results – has been guided by the hope that research into the Pentateuch would be stimulated by a broad, interdisciplinary approach that brings experts from archaeology, history and different streams of literary criticism together. It is our first and foremost desire, therefore, to thank all contributors to the conference, both speakers and other participants, for having made this meeting at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, 27–28 March 2015, indeed a memorable experience of open, honest and inspiring discussion.

The Pentateuch's self-presentation as the primeval history of humanity and Israel that, to a certain degree, conceals rather than reveals its "real" historical setting(s), has proven to be a formidable battleground of diverse hypotheses; accordingly there is little agreement – viewed from a global perspective – even on the criteria employed in reconstructing the historical development of the texts in question. One of the key issues involved in many discussions is that of how much of the Pentateuch results from literary activities in the preexilic period, and to what extent it is a document that grew in exilic and postexilic times. Tendencies in this regard could be described in terms of a continental divide between Europe, on the one hand – where many scholars tend to accept later rather than earlier dates for large sections of the Pentateuch – and North America and Israel, on the other – where scholars tend to imagine the Pentateuch as largely a preexilic document. These tendencies, however, cannot be regarded as a rule without exceptions and should not be over-emphasized. We all rely on literary and historical arguments based on the same evidence. In an area of disputed hypotheses we should concentrate on what we think to be the strongest historical arguments.

We have thus chosen the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the crisis that has sparked most extensive literary reflection on the Hebrew Bible, as the point of departure for this conference. Is the trauma of 587 reflected in the Pentateuch – or can the contrary be demonstrated? We invited outstanding scholars from diverse backgrounds to make a historical or literary argument they consider relevant in this regard and to bring it into discussion. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the opinions expressed in this volume are heterogeneous and controversial. Based on feedback from speakers and other participants, however, we are confident that our conference has allowed for a profound confrontation between conflicting views that may help address some of the issues at stake more accurately.

On the basis of thematic considerations, we have divided this volume into four major sections. The first sets the stage by bringing together archaeological, historical and literary perspectives on the fall of Jerusalem in the contributions of Israel Finkelstein, Lester Grabbe, Peter Dubovský and Jean-Pierre Sonnet. In the second part, exemplary texts and themes are discussed, tendentially moving from Genesis to Deuteronomy in the five articles by Angelika Berlejung, Jean Louis Ska, Konrad Schmid, Eckart Otto and Nili Wazana. The third section concentrates on priestly texts and cultic (dis-)continuities in the papers contributed by Nathan MacDonald, Jeffrey Stackert, Dominik Markl and Christophe Nihan, while the final part opens up a perspective on the relationship between the Pentateuch and the prophets in articles by Georg Fischer, Bernard Levinson and Ronald Hendel. The concluding essay, by Jean-Pierre Sonnet, grew out of our first editorial meeting, which started as a celebration of the delightful experience of the conference with a drink on the roof terrace of the PBI, but ended in an intense discussion on the reflection of trauma in literature.

If many questions have been left open, some issues have crystallized with greater clarity and acuteness during the course of the discussion. We wish to mention here three areas that were emphasized by speakers in their retrospective statements.

First, the lack of archaeological evidence of scribal culture in early Persian Jerusalem and Yehud, as pointed out by Israel Finkelstein, stands in stark contrast to exegetes' tendency to date several texts – within or outside the Pentateuch – to this period. “Clearly this is an issue for all of us, whether we hold that texts were mostly transmitted in this period or whether we hold they were mostly being composed (as well as transmitted) in this period”, says Nathan MacDonald. Is the lack of evidence just a result of the very limited archaeological access to the decisive areas of the temple in Jerusalem? Or do we have to consider other settings for the origin of several texts?

Second, as Jean Louis Ska suggests,

The disappearance of a culture triggers off a certain type of literature. This is the case in Mesopotamia with Berossus and in Egypt with Manetho. They wrote their work in Hellenistic times when their civilizations' glory already belonged to the past. The Torah could be – to some extent – an answer of the same type to the end of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah.

Bernard Levinson's question, however, remains open: “Does the non-mention of Jerusalem in the Pentateuch translate into a direct statement about the social world of a text, or does it reflect the literary plot and staging of the text (its pseudepigraphic attribution to Moses prior to the entry into the land)?”

Third, the issue of linguistic dating – a central one for some colleagues – was raised, but not systematically discussed, at our conference. While it is unlikely that anybody would doubt the evidence of linguistic change within the Hebrew Bible, views on when major changes happened and if classical language could have been conservatively used in certain genres even at later stages of linguistic development, remain highly controversial.

We are indebted to several persons and institutions without whose support the conference and its proceedings could not have been realised. We are grateful to the PBI's rector, Michael Kolarcik, for supporting the conference and to Agustinus Gianto, Pro-Dean of the Oriental Faculty of the PBI, who contributed a paper on Daniel. We thank Carlo Valentino, general secretary of the PBI, for taking care of countless organizational details, as well as our doctoral student Simon Weyringer, who helped organize the attendance of more than 200 international participants. We acknowledge the valuable support by many students in our doctoral and licentiate programmes who made speakers and participants feel welcome at the PBI. Speakers enjoyed the hospitality of the Jesuit community of the PBI and the final dinner at Sora Margherita's restaurant in the historic Jewish quarter of Rome.

Elizabeth Lock (Oxford) has done invaluable work as the copy-editor of this volume, both in improving the English of non-native speakers and in handling all the intricacies of formatting. We are grateful to the staff of Mohr Siebeck, especially Henning Ziebritzki and Dominika Zgolik, for their friendly and straightforward collaboration. We thank our doctoral students Charles Samson and Seung ae Kim for proofreading and composing the indices.

Both the conference and the preparation of the proceedings were co-sponsored by Georgetown University (Washington, DC) and the Gregorian University Foundation (New York). We thank both institutions and their representatives, President John J. DeGioia and Fr Alan Fogarty SJ respectively, for their generous support. Finally, we are grateful to Konrad Schmid, Hermann Spieckermann and Mark Smith for inviting us to publish this volume in the series *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*. We hope that this book may help to continue the spirited discussions that we enjoyed in Rome.

Peter Dubovský, Dominik Markl and Jean-Pierre Sonnet
Rome, Pentecost 2016

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