The Temple Library in Apocalyptic Legend

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The library of the Jerusalem temple supplied a plundered Pentateuch for Vespasian's triumph.¹ Other hints on books in the temple in the early Roman period are given by Josephus, and by rabbinic references to three copies of the Pentateuch appertaining to the temple-court, and also often simply to 'the book of the temple-court'.² These sources are commonly viewed together with the suggestions of a temple library in the Greek period emerging from 2 Maccabees and the Letter of Aristeas.³

Less notice seems to have been given in this connection to allied legends in two apocalypses, the Assumption of Moses and the Apocalypse of Ezra. The former was composed not long before Josephus's birth, the latter soon after he issued his Antiquities.⁴ Through prophecy attributed to Moses and Ezra, respectively, the two works tell stories of the formation and the re-making of the book-collection. These are reviewed below both as legends of the library current in Herodian Judaea, and as indications that apocalyptic writers from this time and place related themselves to a collection of sacred books. A strong teaching tendency asserted the unbroken continuity of Israelite access to familiar sacred texts, but these writers commended their new prophecies

¹ Josephus, B.J. 7.150 ("the law of the Jews" was carried after the other spoils from the temple); 7.162 ("the law" and the purple hangings of the sanctuary were afterwards laid up by Titus in the palaces).
through attention to the critical moments of the birth and the re-birth of the book-collection, and to its hidden as well as public character.

The Assumption of Moses

The Mosaic prophecy in the Assumption of Moses is envisaged against the background of the narratives brought together in Deuteronomy 31. This sequence forms one of the main biblical indications of the presence of books in the holy place. Moses, having given Joshua a charge in the sight of all Israel to go with them into the promised land (Deut 31:7–8; cf. Deut 3:28), writes out the law, delivers it to the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, and the elders, and commands them to read it every seven years before all Israel assembled before the Lord “in the place which he shall choose” (Deut 31:9–13). Then Moses is warned by the Lord that the days when he must die draw near, and is summoned to the tent of meeting with Joshua, who is to receive a charge; from the pillar of cloud at the doors of the tent of meeting the Lord prophecies to Moses the evils that will come upon Israel after his death, and commands him and Joshua to write out and teach to Israel the Song found at Deut 32:1–44, as a witness to the coming woes (Deut 31:14–21). Moses and Joshua together write out the Song, and the Lord himself—or, in much of the Septuagint tradition, Moses once more—gives Joshua a charge (Deut 31:22–23). Finally, when Moses has finished writing out the law in a book, he commands the Levites to put this book of the law by the side of the ark (Deut 31:24–7), and to assemble the elders of the tribes and the officers to hear him recite the Song (Deut 31:28–30), which is ultimately said to have been spoken by Moses and Joshua together (Deut 32:44). The chosen place (Deut 31:13) came of course to be understood as the holy place in Jerusalem, and the temple: “I have chosen this place… I have chosen and hallowed this house” (2 Chr 7:12–16).

Books and the sanctuary are central here. In the light of the legends about to be considered, however, it is also notable that in this sequence two narratives dealing with the publication and deposit of the law by Moses (Deut 31:9–13; 31:24–7) enclose the narrative (partly taken originally from a different source) of a fresh divine prophecy given to Moses when he is together with

5 For assessment of the attestation of 31:23 LXX “And Moses commanded Joshua… you shall bring the children of Israel into the land which the Lord has promised, and he will be with you” see C. Dogniez & M. Harl, La Bible d’Alexandrie: Le Deutéronome (Paris: Cerf, 1992) 318; they do not follow the Greek text without “Moses” preferred by J.W. Wevers and C. McCarthy, Deuteronomy (Biblia Hebraica Quinta, 5; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 138*-89*.