
This volume about one of the lesser known Old Testament Pseudepigrapha consists of five parts: an introduction, a text edition, a commentary, bibliographies, and indices.

The introduction begins with a brief discussion of the writing’s title (xv-xvi), followed by a lengthy section on 4 Baruch’s place in the cycle of traditions and literature on Baruch and Jeremiah (xvi-xxx); a concise statement on Herzer’s views on author, location and date (xxx-xxxvi); and some pages on the text’s transmission (xxxvi-xlii). Whether this is a felicitous arrangement of the introductory questions, is a matter to which I shall presently turn.

The edition of the long Greek text-form (2-39) is eclectic, based on the evidence offered by secondary sources (earlier editions and translations), and has no critical pretences. Under the circumstances, this is a wholly acceptable choice. Commentaries on Old Testament Pseudepigrapha are urgently needed, even if these can in many instances only be based on more or less provisional editions, because the history of their textual transmission is often extremely complicated. For a new critical edition, Herzer refers to the project currently being undertaken by B. Heininger of Würzburg (xxxvi, note 106). In the meantime, the presence in this volume of Herzer’s own provisional text is most welcome, if only for convenience’s sake. The apparatus lists the variants of the witnesses to the long Greek text. Footnotes to the translation on the right hand pages account for choices made in difficult cases, or refer to the commentary.

The commentary (43-157) offers an interpretation of the writing’s nine chapters. It is detailed, but keeps an eye on the main lines—a brief outline of the structure of the writing as whole might have been helpful.

Herzer takes the story of 4 Baruch very seriously, or at least pays no attention to possibly humorous elements in the story, as for instance in chapter 5. There it is related how one of the main figures in the story, Abimelech, was sent away from Jerusalem by Jeremiah, ostensibly to fetch figs for the sick, but in reality to save Abimelech from the disaster that was about to come over Jerusalem. On his way, Abimelech decided to have a nap, only to wake up again after sixty-six years. On his return to Jerusalem, he did not recognize it. He said, in Herzer’s translation: “Blessed be the Lord, for a great trance has come upon me. This is not the city.” Assuming that he had lost his way, he left the place, but then noticed the landmarks that confirmed that it was Jerusalem, after all. Having re-entered the city, Abimelech searched for people he knew, but found nobody. Again he said: “Blessed be the Lord, for a great trance has come upon me.” Outside the city, he sat down, grieving and waiting for the trance to be lifted from him.
I myself am inclined to think that this is a funny scene, and intended as such. Of course, this view is at risk of being anachronistic. But is it really excluded that the sentence, translated by Herzer as “Blessed be the Lord, for a great trance has come upon me,” could also, and perhaps more accurately, be translated as “Good Heavens, I think I’ve gone mad”? In any case, Herzer’s exposé on the word “trance” in this context (91; cf. xxxii-xxxiv) seems to be a case of over-interpretation.

On the whole, Herzer’s commentary is useful, and a true enrichment for the study of this writing in particular, of the Jeremiah and Baruch-cycle, and of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha in general. Having said this, I must raise a fundamental objection to Herzer’s approach of this writing and the living tradition it represents. Let us return to the introduction of this volume.

The order in which the introductory questions are addressed is debatable, and not only from the perspective of composition. For instance, Herzer begins with addressing the question whether the author of 4 Baruch knew 2 Baruch (as opposed to the reverse possibility), and only after that he considers the date at which 4 Baruch may have been written. A more logical order would have been to first establish that date, so that the dependence of 2 Baruch on 4 Baruch could simply have been ruled out. The real problem is, however, that there is no way of dating 4 Baruch other than in relation to 2 Baruch (whatever that writing’s date may be!). If the examination of this question would lead to the conclusion that 4 Baruch depends on 2 Baruch, its date would have to be designated as “later than 2 Baruch.” Herzer, however, reaches a much more specific date, namely the years 117-132 CE (xxxiv). He adduces many and rather variegated reasons for this, but the main reason is that 4 Baruch, in Herzer’s opinion, was a Jewish writing. That, however, is a supposition, for which he does not adduce a single positive ground. Instead, he continues with the question of the Christian redaction’s date, for there is no doubt that 4 Baruch as it has been transmitted to us is of Christian origin. Thus, Herzer again follows the wrong order, giving precedence to speculation over firm ground.

In this connection, it is telling that the issue of textual transmission comes last in the introduction, whereas it should have been treated in the very first place. Within the scope of a commentary such as this, Herzer cannot be expected to have solved the intricacies of 4 Baruch’s textual history. However, if he would first have presented the tremendous problems in this respect, before discussing anything else, it would from the outset have been clear to the reader (and perhaps also Herzer himself) that everything that is said afterwards about author, location and date, let alone the supposed Jewish model for the present work, is tentative only, and does not warrant the confidence with which Herzer presents his conclusions.

Moreover, his obsession with the Jewish original blocks his view on the meaning 4 Baruch may have had for the numerous Christian readers of this writing throughout the history of its transmission, until well into the seventeenth century. For instance, it is said in 4 Bar 6:23 that only those exiles from Jerusalem may