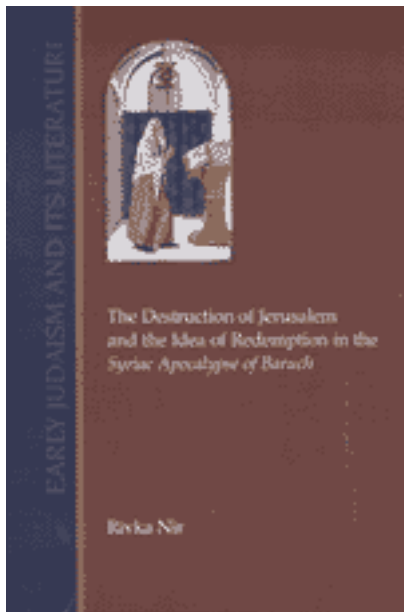


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Nir, Rivka

The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Idea of Redemption in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch

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Even though it has long been recognized that many of the Jewish pseudepigraphical writings have been preserved by Christians, the implications of this insight have only recently been studied systematically. Over the last decades, the Christian adoption and transmission of Jewish pseudepigrapha has emerged as a central aspect of several studies on the pseudepigrapha. The principal participants in the debate include Robert Kraft (methodological considerations), Martin de Jonge (*Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*), David Satran (*Lives of the Prophets*), and Michael Knibb (*1 Enoch*), to name just a few. The problems are considerable. Several of the writings bundled under the label “pseudepigrapha” are preserved only in translations, or translations of translations; some writings show unmistakable traces of Christian glosses and reworkings, whereas in other instances we might want to debate what exactly it is that would lead us to conclude that a text can *only* be Jewish or Christian. While there are some cases in which the texts in question can be classified with some degree of certainty (*Jubilees* is a Jewish work, and the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* at least in its present form is a Christian work), there remains considerable room for debate in between.

Rivka Nir’s learned new study should be read with this context in mind. The book, which is based on her 1996 dissertation written under the supervision of Professors Joshua

Efron and Aryeh Kasher of Tel-Aviv University, presents a running commentary on select passages of 2 (*Syriac Apocalypse of*) *Baruch*, the (step-) sister apocalypse of 4 Ezra. Nir structures her book in two parts. The first half is devoted to a careful reading of three central pericopes taken from the narrative frame of 2 *Baruch* (chs. 1–9): the destruction of Jerusalem and the promise of a heavenly city (2 *Bar.* 4:1–7), the hiding of the temple implements (2 *Bar.* 6:7–10), and the abandonment of the temple just moments before the city is leveled (2 *Bar.* 8:1–5). In her explanation of these passages, Nir refers the reader to a formidable number of parallel texts found in biblical, apocryphal and pseudepigraphical, rabbinic, and patristic literature. No doubt the wealth of material here collected will make this book a rather powerful tool for future studies on 2 *Baruch*. Especially noteworthy is Nir's discussion of the parallel accounts of the fate of the temple vessels in 2 Macc 2, the *Paralipomena Jeremiou*, the *Jeremiah Apocryphon*, the *Vitae Prophetarum*, and Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*.

In the second half of the book Nir moves on to what she identifies to be the three main visions in the eschatological part of 2 *Baruch* (chs. 10–77): the appearance of the Messiah (2 *Bar.* 24–30); the vision of the cedar, the vine, and the spring (2 *Bar.* 36–40); and the vision of the cloud that rains bright and dark waters (2 *Bar.* 53; 56–74).

However, the book is not intended to be merely a commentary. Indeed, all exegetical efforts serve to substantiate Nir's central claim, that 2 *Baruch* is a Christian work, clearly set apart from the Jewish tradition. In the introduction Nir points to the recent changes in scholarly perceptions of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. "The old presumption that whatever is not clearly Christian is Jewish has been found to be baseless. A document composed or compiled by a Christian need not necessarily contain obvious 'Christian' contents" (15). After some two hundred pages of careful textual analysis, Nir concludes: "The *Syriac Baruch*, in its extant form, is a Christian work, whose internal structure, ideas, and tendencies may only be understood against the background of Christian theology" (199). The author acknowledges the fact that there are no obvious Christian glosses or statements in 2 *Baruch* and that Jesus—or any other early Christian figure, for that matter—is never mentioned, but she simply retorts that "it is precisely the absence of explicitly Christian features that may at times serve as the key to the identification and understanding of a work" (199).

Nir's attempt to identify 2 *Baruch* as a Christian text becomes especially pronounced in the latter half of the book. According to Nir, all three visions in 2 *Baruch* are symbols of the two Christian sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist. Baruch's vision of the vine and the spring (chs. 36–40) and the vision of the cloud (chs. 56–74) are thus depictions of the *parousia* by means of baptism and the Eucharist. Nir is aware of the numerous parallels in Jewish literature, most notably perhaps of those in 4 Ezra, and quotes them

extensively. She also comments on the depictions of a militant messiah found both in *2 Baruch* and in numerous Jewish texts, though in the end she deems these comparisons “entirely without basis” (181).

Here Nir will not find many followers. It may be true that the old assumption that every text that is not clearly Christian therefore must be Jewish can no longer be maintained, but why is it any more plausible to argue with Nir that *2 Baruch*, which in her reading is not clearly a Jewish text, therefore must be Christian? Nir’s analysis is plagued with insurmountable methodological problems. Her argument that *2 Baruch* is a Christian composition rests entirely on parallels she draws between *2 Baruch* and early Christian texts from the New Testament and early patristic literature. But parallels are parallels, not sources of origin—surely by the early second century A.D. Jewish and Christian apocalypticists drew from a common pool of traditions. Moreover, Nir never makes a convincing case why she discards a considerable amount of Jewish evidence in favor of privileging parallels in Christian texts. A closer look at *2 Baruch* shows that her analysis is seriously flawed.

Take, for example, Adam’s fall (*2 Bar.* 48:42–43; 54:15–19; and 56:5–16), an issue of some concern for both Jews and Christians during the turn of the era. Even though human beings are affected by Adam’s sin, we read in *2 Baruch*, they still have a free will and are able to choose not to sin. “Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become our own Adam” (*2 Bar.* 54:19). Humans can attain salvation through “the eternal Law which exists forever and ever” (*2 Bar.* 59:2), another crucial motif in *2 Baruch*. This should be compared with Paul’s Adam/Christ typology in Rom 5:12–21, a foundational passage for the Christian doctrine of original sin, which predates *2 Baruch* by less than a century. In Paul’s reading, Adam’s sin brought death to all and became an *unavoidable* part of the human condition. Salvation can be gained only through Christ. Paul also argues for the importance of the law, but only in so far as it makes human sin fully apparent, not for its salvific quality. In light of these differences, it is hardly conceivable that *2 Baruch* presents an alternative *Christian* understanding of the fall of Adam and the means by which Christians gain salvation.

There are other problems with Nir’s book, too, such as her failure to differentiate adequately between the diverse *genres* and origins of Jewish apocalypses from the Greco-Roman period. For example, while there appears to be virtual unanimous agreement among scholars that most (if not all) of the apocalyptic compositions in *1 Enoch* predate *2 Baruch* and that *1 Enoch* and *2 Baruch* are very different compositions in about every conceivable way, Nir writes: “Hence the thesis that I propose in this book is that *Enoch* belongs to the same theological and ideological complex as does *2 Baruch*, and therefore

does not reflect a Jewish tradition prior to that of *Baruch*” (148 n. 85). The presence of Enochic manuscripts among the Dead Sea fragments alone refutes this “thesis.”

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Nir’s book solely on the basis that its central argument is untenable. It is. In the end we will have to acknowledge that most of the issues currently discussed regarding the Christian adoption of Jewish pseudepigrapha does not apply to *2 Baruch*, which does not leave much room for ambiguity. But Nir’s book has more to offer. In an ironic sense, Nir’s thorough discussion of the Jewish, particularly of the pseudepigraphical as well as rabbinic, literature presents the most striking counterargument to her own thesis and makes the book important.