

## JERUSALEM 586BC || KATASTROPHAL?

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Since Martin Noth's *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, Nothian scholarship repeats its fundamental credo: the Deuteronomistic Historiography (DH) was composed in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem<sup>1</sup>. This work was produced in order to understand and explain the end of the kingdom of Juda as well as the exile in Babylon. "Faced with these dramatic events of which he had been a witness and that seemed to bring an end to the existence of the people of Yhwh, the Dtr tries to explain the catastrophe<sup>2</sup>".

The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's troops in 586 came no doubt as a shock. Yet, was it so catastrophic that it led one of its eye-witnesses to produce a history before Herodotus? The predictable reaction of various Judean groups around 586 is reviewed to evaluate Noth's hypothesis.

For Zedekiah and his family, 586 was obviously a catastrophe. The last Judean king lost his throne, his sons, his eyes and was taken to exile with the rest of his family (2 Kgs 24). This family lost much, but it was unlikely to write a history, unless the blind father dictated it to one of his daughters. The other 832 deportees of 586 (Jer 52) probably experienced their departure with relief. They had gone through siege and surrender unscathed, new perspectives were opening for them in Babylonia, things could have been much worse. Moreover, their departure was by now a well established pattern, the third convoy of exiles leaving Juda for Mesopotamia and certainly the least traumatic one<sup>3</sup>. And it seemed realistic to expect that life was possible away from Palestine (Jer 29).

The 3023 Judeans exiled in 597 are just as unlikely candidate authors for DH. They probably received the news of the destruction of the capital with satisfaction. The utter failure of those who took their places in Jerusalem vindicated them and proved that once they left Zion, everything went wrong. For Ezekiel and his colleagues, 586 was no catastrophe. Far from it, it proved that after all, they had been right to resist the Babylonians.

<sup>1</sup> M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, Tübingen, 1967: 91.110.

<sup>2</sup> A. de Pury Th. Römer, "Deuteronomistic Historiography" in A. de Pury Th. Römer, *Israel constructs its history* (JSOT.S 306), Sheffield 2000: 51.

<sup>3</sup> After 200.000 deportees (from the Sheffelah and the rest of Palestine?) in 701 and 3023 in 597, the group of 832 exiles of 586 was a small affair: E.A. Knauf, "Wie kann ich singen im fremden Land?", *Bibel und Kirche* 55 (2000): 132-139.



How was the destruction of Jerusalem experienced by those who stayed in Palestine? As recently made clear by Oded Lipschits, life went on after the destruction of Jerusalem. The capital of the Babylonian province was transferred to Mizpah, possibly before 586<sup>4</sup>. Jerusalem destroyed, Jeremiah was free to join Gedaliah (Jer 40). The Benjamin region was unaffected by the wave of destruction that swept over Southern Juda and Philistia<sup>5</sup>. The razing of Jerusalem liberated Benjamin from the Judean yoke. Far from being catastrophic, it avenged the descendant of Saul from Josiah who had conquered them three or four decades earlier. Mizpah experienced the end of Jerusalem as a victory over the anti-Babylonian party. Mizpah's scribes had therefore no reason to commit themselves to the writing of a history of Juda and Israel to help them come to term with the misfortunes of Jerusalem. Contrarily to 2 Kgs 25,26 and Jer 43,6-7, the assassination of Gedaliah and the deportation of 745 Judeans in 582 did *not* put an end to the government of Mizpah, Jeremiah was probably *not* taken to Egypt and the land was *not* left empty for the returnees of the Persian times<sup>6</sup>. Gedaliah and others after him were kings of the Babylonian Kingdom of Juda at Mizpah<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, 586 did not mark the end of the kingdom of Juda, nor did it provoke a catastrophic exile. In the absence of a clear group of potential authors for DH in 586, one can suspect that THE catastrophe of 586 may have left extensive traces in the Bible. However, the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 covers a mere 23 verses (2 Kgs 25,8-17; Jer 39,8; 51,13-14) plus the first three chapters of the book of Lamentations. In comparison, the space devoted to the destruction of Niniveh is twice as large (Hab 1; Nah 2-3; Jon 1-4). The fall of Niniveh caught the world unaware, while the destruction of Jerusalem came at the end of a lengthy process of Imperial integration initiated by Salmanesser III three centuries earlier.

The catastrophic nature of the destruction of Jerusalem is far from obvious. This is no catastrophe as the Priestly writer is slowly replacing the author of DH as first inventor of an extensive Biblical narrative<sup>8</sup>. A catastrophe to Noth's theory.

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<sup>4</sup> O. Lipschits, "Benjamin region under the Babylonian rule", *Tel Aviv* 26 (1999):155-190.

<sup>5</sup> E. Stern, "The Babylonian gap", *BAR* 26/6 (2000): 45-51.

<sup>6</sup> H.M. Barstad, *The myth of the empty land* (SO.S 28), Oslo, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Miller & J.H. Hayes, *A history of Ancient Israel and Judah*, Philadelphia, 1986: 421-426.

<sup>8</sup> N. Lohfink, "Die Priesterschrift und die Geschichte", in N. Lohfink *Studien zum Pentateuch* (SBA 4) Stuttgart 1988: 213-253; T. Pola, *Die Ursprüngliche Priesterschrift* (WMANT 70), Neukirchen-Vlyun 1995; E.A. Knauf, "Die Priesterschrift und die Geschichten der Deuteronomisten", in Th. Römer, *The future of the Deuteronomistic History* (BETHL 147), Leuven 2000: 101-118; A. de Pury, "Der Priesterschriftliche Umgang mit der Jakobsgeschichte" in R.G. Kratz T. Krüger K. Schmid (eds), *Schriftauslegung in der Schrift* (BZAW 300), Berlin 2000: 22-60.