

Baruch

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

THE CONTEXT

The short book of Baruch says it is written by the secretary of the prophet Jeremiah while he is one of the exiles in Babylon. This location is unexpected, because Jeremiah 43:1-7 says that after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, both Jeremiah and Baruch were taken to Egypt, not Babylon. However, other ancient Jewish writings also assume that Baruch ended up in Babylon. Most interpreters think this book was actually written in the second century BCE. It has too many historical inaccuracies to have been written in or near the time of Baruch. In addition, it knows parts of the book of Daniel that were not written until sometime near the second century BCE. By the fourth century CE, another work of the Apocrypha, the Letter of Jeremiah, was appended to Baruch. Fragments of the Letter of Jeremiah, but not of Baruch, were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. (The Letter of Jeremiah is largely an exhortation not to worship other gods because they have no real power.)

SUMMARY

The book of Baruch is made up of four distinct parts, which were all composed independently. The narrative introduction was the last piece written because it was composed to introduce the combination of the other three. This section introduces Baruch as the writer of the prayers and poems that follow. It also includes a letter that addresses the people who are left in Judah after the capital has fallen and the king has been taken into exile. Baruch says he is sending back these liturgical pieces (the prayers and poems) as things to be recited on feast days back in the homeland (1:14).

The second part of Baruch is a prayer (1:15—3:8). It begins with an extensive confession of sin that acknowledges that the exile is the result of the people's rejection of God's law and their worship of other gods. Baruch then asks God to rescue them from the exile. While he wants to call everyone to repent of their sins, Baruch asks God to restore the people because of who God is (e.g., 2:14, 19). Baruch

reminds God of God's mercy and grace that will be the basis for the return of the people to Jerusalem. When God restores them, God will be known for being merciful, gracious, and righteous. Still, Baruch says that the central reason for the exile is to teach the people to be faithful (2:27-35). Much that is found in this prayer is drawn from various passages in the Hebrew Bible, including Leviticus, Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, and Jeremiah. Its most extensive allusions echo Daniel 9. So this prayer was originally written after a good deal of the canon of the Hebrew Bible had begun to take shape. The prayer ends with a petition for forgiveness and a request for God to enable the people to be faithful (3:1-8).

The third section is a poem to Wisdom that is written in the style of similar poems within the Jewish Wisdom tradition (3:9—4:4). In Baruch, Wisdom is elusive; she is difficult for humans to find, even as she is close to God and the key to a relationship with God. While other peoples have sought her without success, God has given Israelites access to her through the Law. With that revelation of Wisdom, Israel can know the will of God.

The final section is a poem or psalm that offers consolation and encouragement to the exiles (4:5—5:9). The poem has the personified city of Jerusalem as its speaker. Jerusalem assures the people that the exile is not permanent. She calls the people her children and promises that they will return gloriously and that God will extend mercy and give them righteousness. So a wonderful future with God awaits God's people.

DIGGING DEEPER

Overall, this book explains the exile as an act of God that was the result of the sins of the people. If the book is written just after the initial successes of the Maccabean Revolt, as many think, it provides some reason for the suffering that went on in the days that led up to the revolt. Just as the sins and unfaithfulness of the people of Jerusalem in the sixth century led to the exile, so the sin and unfaithfulness of the residents of Jerusalem in the second century led to the suffering under Antiochus IV. The promise of salvation that Baruch offers begins to be fulfilled as the Maccabeans are successful. The book then calls the people to faithfulness and obedience so God can continue to bless them.