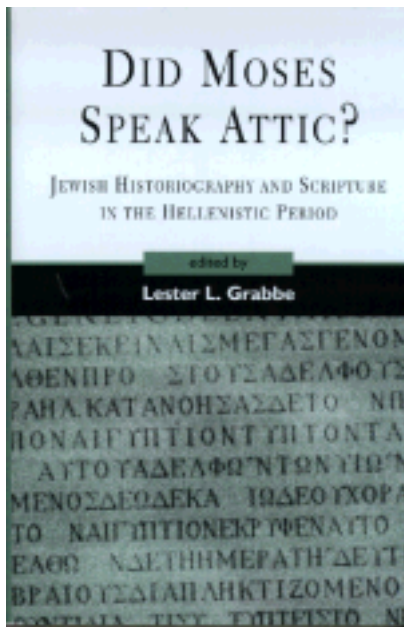


RBL 10/2004



**Grabbe, Lester L., ed.**

*Did Moses Speak Attic? Jewish Historiography and Scripture in the Hellenistic Period*

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 317; European Seminar in Historical Methodology 3

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001. Pp. 352.  
Cloth. \$84.00. ISBN 1841271551.

Erich S. Gruen  
University of California  
Berkeley, CA 94720

Is the Bible a Hellenistic composition? Niels Peter Lemche posed that question in provocative fashion through an essay published in 1993. His seminal article provides much of the impetus for this volume, ably edited by Lester Grabbe and containing contributions that support, expand upon, modify, challenge, or firmly resist Lemche's conclusions. The volume itself publishes papers from two international meetings of the European Seminar on Methodology in Israel's History, the third publication of that ongoing seminar. Grabbe and his colleagues merit congratulations for focusing attention seriously on the methodological problems and pitfalls involved in reconstructing the historical setting for biblical texts—and in assessing their reliability in turn for the reconstruction of historical Israel.

Repeated scrutiny of methodological underpinnings is salutary. But the subject itself possesses hazards. Several of the papers, while offering some acute and stimulating observations, raise questions about their own methodology.

Lemche's 1993 paper is reprinted here, but, for some inexplicable reason, appears as the last essay in the collection. Hence, the replies, even replies to the replies, precede the article. Just why the editor preferred this peculiar sequence baffles understanding. But

there are more serious issues at stake. Lemche, who wishes to set the composition of the Bible no earlier than the Hellenistic era, disposes successfully of some a priori assumptions and insubstantial arguments by previous scholars. His own approach, however, suffers from similar shortcomings. The method of dating biblical texts by starting from the *terminus ad quem* instead of the *terminus a quo* may be perfectly reasonable in principle. But when Lemche insists (294–95) that the point of departure for dating the books of Samuel must be 350 C.E., the putative time of the earliest manuscript of the LXX, this borders on a *reductio ad absurdum*, implemented in practice by no one, not even by Lemche. His assertion that the book of Joshua (and the bulk of other biblical texts) were composed in the Jewish Diaspora (299–300, 308) rests on no argumentation whatsoever, hardly a methodology to be recommended. However unreliable the texts may be for historical purposes, they could as readily have been created (with tendentious purposes) in Palestine as elsewhere. Indeed Lemche goes further to speculate that the prevalence of the motif of the exile in Jewish literature serves as a smokescreen by Diaspora Jews who did not wish to return to barren Palestine (307). In view of the consistent expressions of attachment to Jerusalem and the homeland in the texts (even the acknowledged Hellenistic texts), this claim seems especially paradoxical. And Lemche's rejection of the Persian period as an appropriate setting for composition is equally arbitrary. Having established to his own satisfaction the influence of Greek models on the biblical narratives (again without serious argumentation), he rules out a Persian context on the grounds that Greek authors were presumably not widely read in the Achaemenid Empire (308–9). Lemche, who condemns circular reasoning in others, has here lapsed into it himself.

Rainer Albertz engages in a frontal assault on Lemche. He rightly faults him for failing to provide a sociohistorical reconstruction that would make the Hellenistic period a logical time for the invention of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History. And he makes the telling point that the multiple copies of these texts at Qumran presuppose their existence and authority for a period of some extent prior to the Scrolls (35). But Albertz's supposed "refutation" of a Hellenistic date rests on some questionable assumptions of his own. He finds Hellenistic culture more of a threat to Near Eastern traditions than an incentive to their development, and he cites Ben Sira as reaction against a Hellenistic challenge (31–32). This turns the whole issue on its head. Did authors such as Manetho and Berossus not advance their national cultures while writing in Greek in the Hellenistic era, encouraged by the climate of their times? And there is nothing in Ben Sira to suggest that he resisted any "challenge" from the culture of the Greeks. Albertz employs the evidence of Hecataeus of Abdera to show that the Pentateuch must already have been in circulation prior to 300 B.C.E. (40–46). Perhaps it was, but Hecataeus's remarks certainly do not prove it. His text is riddled with discrepancies and omissions, and his informants,

even when they got some facts straight, need not have derived them from any authoritative written text.

Hans Barstad adds an important dimension to the debate. By detailing numerous parallels between the Deuteronomistic History and ancient Near Eastern writings, he demonstrates that the biblical texts need not have been modeled on Greek prototypes (52–75). But he too slips into a logical fallacy. The presence of Near Eastern comparanda in no way excludes composition in the Hellenistic period. Barstad's assertion that the Hebrew Bible's obsession with deities other than YHWH is incompatible with the Hellenistic era (68) has no basis. Does it better suit the Persian era? Nothing in Barstad's valuable contribution refutes a Hellenistic date.

Lester Grabbe makes a much better case. It rests largely on the evidence of Ben Sira. As Grabbe perceptively points out, Ben Sira's summary of the great men of Israel's past (44–50) coincides so closely with the biblical narrative that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he had it in front of him (142–48). And if Ben Sira composed his work shortly after 200 B.C.E., it seems probable that the Hebrew Bible, in something like its present form, had been around long enough to gain authoritative status. That makes a Persian era date more probable than a Hellenistic one. The argument has real merit—but only if Ben Sira's text goes back to the early second century. Thomas Thompson expresses sharp doubt on that score: the colophon to the Greek text is not definite proof of an authorial grandfather (278). Grabbe has the better of this debate, but, like others in this collection, only by having recourse to dubious methodology. He puts too much faith in arguments from silence: for example, Ben Sira says nothing about the Maccabean revolt (142, 332), and the prophetic literature omits reference to Greeks or Hellenistic kingdoms (154). He surrounds his good case with some weak argumentation: the Persian period is a more likely time than the Hellenistic to gather traditions after the exile (152–53) and a more suitable time for priests to write up religious texts (154–55). Why? These are assertions rather than reasoned conclusions. The essay would have been stronger without them.

The argument from silence receives an especially paradoxical twist in the article of Kai Peltonen. Whereas Grabbe had used the absence of reference to things Hellenic to claim a Persian date for biblical composition, Peltonen, who believes Chronicles to have been composed in the Hellenistic era, takes the absence of allusion to Hellenism as indication that it represented such a threat to Jewish identity that the author repressed it altogether (271). If ever a question was begged, this was it!

Robert Carroll provides a judicious and welcome approach to the problem. Unlike Lemche's extreme position that the starting point for chronology must be the first

manuscript of the LXX in the fourth century C.E., Carroll begins properly with the Qumran writings. They presume the existence of an established body of texts (93–94), but they do not preclude fluidity. The very idea of a definitive text or even an “original” text, as Carroll observes most acutely, is the product of a post-Gutenberg mentality (97). The composition of the Bible was a lengthy and ongoing process, not to be pinned down to a specific era. Why then does Carroll affirm that “the claim that the Bible came into being during the Hellenistic period looks to me like the beginning of wisdom” (104)? That undercuts his own salutary methodology.

Perhaps the most sobering and valuable comment on this whole question comes in David Gunn’s paper. The very idea of dating a text rests on the optimistic assumption that we have an integrated text to begin with. As Gunn wisely reminds us, we are dealing with composite texts, pieced together, rewritten, and shuffled about over many generations. What, in fact, are we dating—other than our own construction? And the construct is all the more fragile when we date a text by identifying historical circumstances that arise out of the text itself (187–89). Philip Davies’s illuminating discussion of the vicissitudes observable in the various versions of the exodus tale, from both the Jewish and the Egyptian angles, nicely illustrates the complexities (108–28). As Bob Becking puts it elsewhere in the volume, “Dating texts is, in my view, not a historical but a hermeneutical process” (84).

None of this should issue in a counsel of despair. The vigorous debates recorded in the pages of this fine collection will sharpen thinking on basic issues of approach and lead to more sophisticated formulation of methodologies. They may even induce the authors to look again at their own methodologies.