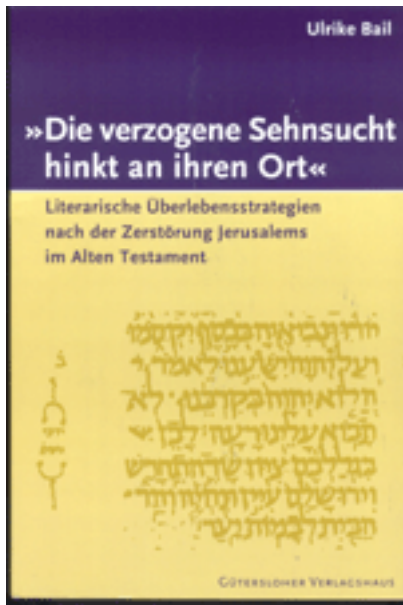


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Bail, Ulrike

**“Die verzogene Sehnsucht hinkt an ihren Ort”:
*Literarische Überlebensstrategien nach der Zerstörung
Jerusalems im Alten Testament***

Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004. Pp. 167.
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This is an intriguing book, especially since it brings together a variety of texts and a diversity of methods on the question of how to cope with disaster. The disaster under discussion is the capture of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, but not so much as a historical event in the traditional, or need I say obsolete, sense of history writing that is focused on kings, battles, and dates. The capture of Jerusalem is dehistoricized and re-spatialized by Bail in taking the “event” in its spatial dimensions. Capture is more of a symbol for destruction and its impact on ordinary life than a date in a textbook.

Bail construes texts as spatial entities in the double meaning of taking space and creating space. A text takes space on a sheet, being surrounded by empty margins. Despite their emptiness, these margins can be full of meaning, since they create some sort of extra space, both literally and at the level of meaning. In some cases the emptiness is filled by markers and other *Randnotizen*. This is especially the case in the Masoretic edition of the book of Micah. In the margin of Mic 3:12—a prophetic text foreseeing the end of Jerusalem as a city—the Masoretes indicated that this verse is the very middle of the Book of the Twelve. Bail is not very clear on the exact significance of this observation. I have the impression that she is trying to avoid a view in which this Masoretic marker would indicate that the Book of the Twelve is all about disaster and decay, but her alternative is

not clear, at least not to me. Texts also create space. They offer their readers a mental map that can help one to overcome disaster by the texts being a landscape of words that, on the one hand, assess the past but, on the other, open perspectives for the future.

Bail applies her insights to two groups of texts: the biblical books of Micah and Lamentations. For Lamentations, she makes a set of valuable remarks. The well-known phenomenon of the acrostic is construed by her as a way of coping with the fall of Jerusalem. The mourners of those days were in a way helped by the literary strategy of this poetic form, since it forced them to organize their bewildered emotions and their disheveled confusion, thus providing a pattern of acceptance. Nevertheless, the book of Lamentations is not without hope: the absence of a consoler implies the want for a utopian space where a consoler is no longer needed.

Of great importance are Bail's analyses of (parts of) the book of Micah. The interpretation of the book is problematic in view of the sharp shift from prophecies of doom in chapter 3 to prophecies of salvation in chapter 4. Bail does not adhere to one of the traditional solutions of this problem: a literary-critical or redaction-historical division between the "true prophet" and his later optimistic refurbishers (Wellhausen and most recently J. A. Wagenaar, *Judgment and Salvation: The Composition and Redaction of Micah 2-5* [VTSup 85; Leiden: Brill, 2001], a publication not quoted by Bail); the ingenious solution that the book of Micah was the deposit of a debate between two opposite prophetic groups (van der Woude); or the idea of a conceptual coherence. Bail seems to favor the position of a final-form reader who might be aware of a complex process of literary emergence but does not care about that when it comes to the act of interpretation. This assessment is based on her—rather unargued—equation of the disaster described in Mic 3:12 with the Babylonian capture in the sixth century B.C.E.

Bail tries to argue that that Mic 3-4 are a literary whole by pointing at a series of *Stichwortverbindungen* between the two chapters. At first sight this seems to be an impressive and adequate argument, but a closer look reveals that the words and idioms occurring in both textual parts are mainly of a quite general character. Besides, it is no great surprise that both in a prophecy of doom and a prophecy of salvation for Jerusalem the indicator יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, "Zion," occurs. Furthermore, some words in Mic 4 do not have a counterpart—either synonym or antonym—in Mic 3. Another argument for coherence is more compelling but could have been elaborated a little further. Bail indicates that both textual units contain the description of transformation: from cult to agriculture (Mic 4) and from dystopia to utopia (Mic 4). She could have strengthened her argument, however, by looking at parallels from the ancient Near Eastern mental space. In Assyrian royal inscriptions the devastation of conquered cities is quite often described in language akin to Mic 3:12. In the so-called Akkadian literary predictive texts a pattern of interchange

between “good times” and “bad times” is detectable.¹ The imagery of reversal in Mic 4 fits this same pattern.² In my view, Bail would have profited from the elaboration of this contextual space.

In her analyses of the hopeful language in Mic 4, Bail makes various interesting remarks, many of which I would applaud. My problem with her exegesis is that it is very thetic: much is postulated, but little is argued. Her book—drenched in traditional as well as postmodern German hermeneutical language—is not easily read and sometimes reminded me of a guided tour in the museum, hearing interesting remarks and enjoying the space in which the artifacts were placed but not coming much closer to the person and the kerygma of the exhibiting painter in the framework of his or her time.

1. On these texts, see M. de Jong Ellis, “Observations on Mesopotamian Oracles and Prophetic Texts: Literary and Historiographic Considerations,” *JCS* 41 (1989): 140–57; T. Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1991).

2. See B. Becking, “The Exile Does Not Equal the Eschaton: An Interpretation of Micah 4:1–5,” in *The New Things: Eschatology in Old Testament Prophecy. Festschrift for Henk Leene* (ed. F. Postma, K. Spronk, and E. Talstra; ACEBTSup 3; Maastricht: Shaker, 2002), 1–7.