

MORE AND LESS THAN A MYTH:
REALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF EXILE FOR THE POLITICAL,
SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF JUDAH

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Introduction

There is no period in the history of ancient Israel for which we have such sparse sources for any reliable historical reconstruction, but which has become so influential for its subsequent political, social, and religious developments, as the sixth-century B.C.E.'s "Babylonian Exile." Thus, it comes as no surprise that several scholars have questioned the historical significance of events reported from it; that is, the displacement and resettlement to Babylon, the emigrations to Egypt, and the return migrations back to Judah during this period. For Robert Carroll, Hans Barstad and others, the whole concept of the term "exile" presented by the Hebrew Bible is allocated to the realm of myth. Carroll first spoke of "the myth of the empty land."¹ This was popularized and expanded by Hans Barstad² and others.³

1. R. P. Carroll, "The Myth of the Empty Land," in *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts* (ed. D. Jobling and T. Pippin; Semeia 59; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 79–93, and "Exile! What Exile? Deportations and the Discourses of Diaspora," in *Leading Captivity Captive: "The Exile" as History and Ideology* (ed. L. L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 278; ESHM 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 62–79.

2. H. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in History and Archaeology of Judah During the "Exilic" Period* (SO 28; Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996).

3. P. R. Davies, "Exile? What Exile? Whose Exile?," in Grabbe, ed., *Leading Captivity Captive*, 128–38; N. P. Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); T. L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Past of Israel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

The Blurred Category of "Myth"

The present discussion of the term "myth" has been used in two different but related ways. Carroll has stressed the ideological character of term. For him, the "myth of the empty land" is a kind of a historical foundation myth created by a small pressure-group of returnees for legitimizing their claim on their landholdings and on their leadership in the second temple community: "A land empty over a lengthy period of time is simply a construct derived from the ideology of pollution-purity values in the second temple community. It ignores the social reality of the people working that land and living there because they do not belong to the sacred enclave."⁴ For Barstad, however, "myth" primarily denotes the lack of historicity. He argues that during the sixth century B.C.E., the land of Judah was not empty. In contrast to the literal "myth of the empty land" trajectory, Barstad tries to show that the opposite was true: "However, with the great majority of the population still intact, life in Judah after 586 in all probability before long went on very much in the same way that it had done before the catastrophe."⁵

In this connection, I would like to remind the reader that our idea that a myth deals with unhistorical topics comes from the fact that "myth" in its original meaning tells the origins of present reality bound to a primeval period, which stood beyond any history. The creation of the world and the descent of kingship from heaven in the Sumerian-Babylonian mythological tradition are, of course, not historical events. But if ones transfer the term "myth" into the historical realm in order to denote foundation histories of states, temples, or groups, its relationship to history becomes more complicated. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, for example, in the charter myth of the Neo-Babylonian Empire from the late seventh and the sixth centuries B.C.E., the story of Marduk's revenge for Sennacherib's total destruction of the city of Babylon 689 B.C.E., which legitimized the wars against the foreign rule of Assyria and the destruction of the Assyrian capital, was founded in the actual course of historical events, although they are interpreted and stylized in a specific theological way.⁶ Therefore, calling an event a "myth" does not imply anything about its degree of historicity (as theoretically also conceded by

4. Carroll, "The Myth of the Empty Land," 90.

5. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land*, 42.

6. R. Albertz, "Exodus: Liberation History Against Charter Myth," in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition: Papers Read at a Noster Conference in Soesterberg, January 4-6, 1999* (ed. J. W. van Henten and A. Houtepen; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 1999), 128-43 (133-37).

Carroll).⁷ Even if a course of events or an entire era was provided with the function of a foundation story, historical myths normally have—as stylized, biased, or exaggerated as their content may be—a background in history.

The question of to what degree the biblical reports on the exilic period are stamped by later ideological interests or how far they constitute a matching description of the events is a matter of critical historical evaluation beyond simple labels like myth or legend. It may be noted that the concept of an empty land during the exile is only supported by 2 Chr 36:21, following the theological concept of the Holiness code (Lev 26:34–5, 43). Neither the reports of 2 Kgs 25 nor Jer 39–43 speak of an empty land, in spite of some generalizing formulations concerning the exiled or emigrants (2 Kgs 25:21; Jer 43:5–7) as Bustanay Oded has already pointed out.⁸ When fully evaluating the significance of the exile, one cannot minimize the historical discontinuity caused by the events without also equally placing emphasis on the ideological discontinuity between monarchic Judah and Persian or Hellenistic Judaism. The degree of discontinuity or the continuity on the historical and religious levels during the exilic period has to be brought into a balanced relationship.

The Reality of Exile

It is not my task here to elaborate on a historical reconstruction of the exilic period in detail since I have undertaken that elsewhere.⁹ In this present essay, however, I would like to mention only some basic dates, mostly given by archaeology, that enable us to estimate the degree of continuity or discontinuity of life in sixth century B.C.E. Judah.

When I wrote my *Israel in Exile*, only a few Judean names in Neo-Babylonian Mesopotamia which could be brought into connection with the deportees were known.¹⁰ Hans Barstad used this fact in order to question the extent of the deportations.¹¹ Meanwhile, by virtue of the

7. Carroll, “The Myth of the Empty Land,” 64.

8. B. Oded, “Where Is the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’ To Be Found?,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 55–74 (59–66).

9. R. Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (trans. D. Green; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 45–132.

10. Cf. *ibid.*, 73–74.

11. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land*, 62–63. See also H. Barstad, “After the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’: Major Challenges in the Study of Neo-Babylonian Judah,” in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 2–20. Although Barstad later reaffirmed his position, he has now

illegally excavated TAYN corpus,¹² not only have 120 personal names containing some form of YHWH theophoric element from two places in central Babylonia been verified, but so too has the place name *āl-Yahūdu*, a name identical with the official name of Jerusalem in the *Babylonian Chronicle* (V.12; ANET 564). This, seemingly, verifies that the Judeans were settled in towns founded or re-organized by the Babylonian state. The alternative spelling of this place name *URU ša LÚ Ia-a-ḫu-du-a+a*, “town of the Judeans,” shows that the Judeans constituted a majority there and thus were settled in “ethnic enclaves,” as similarly seen from the Bible (Ezra 2:59; 8:17). Clearly, the reality of displacement and resettlement of Judeans to Babylonia is no longer in doubt.

Yet, the number of those that were actually displaced is still an ongoing issue. I reckoned that about 20,000 persons or about 25 percent of the entire population was displaced.¹³ Oded Lipschits has suggested about 10,000 or less than 10 percent of the entire population.¹⁴ But, as often overlooked,¹⁵ there must have been a considerable additional loss of Judean population—be it as victims of war, famine, epidemics, or economic exploitations (so rightly Faust¹⁶) since several recent surveys and excavations have shown the number and size of sites datable to the Persian period were heavily reduced when compared with those of the seventh century B.C.E. Compiling and taking into consideration all the variables, Oded Lipschits estimates the loss was about 60 percent of the former population.¹⁷ Apart from the Benjaminite area around the new

conceded: “Obviously, we should not belittle the deportations” (Barstad, “After the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’,” 14).

12. Cf. L. E. Pearce, “New Evidence for Judeans in Babylonia,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 399–411. TAYN is an acronym for “texts from *āl-Yāhūdu* and *Našar*.”

13. Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 90.

14. O. Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah Under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 59.

15. Discussing the possible loss of population, Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land*, 33–34, 42–43, 79–80, is also focused on the deportations.

16. A. Faust, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: A Rural Perspective,” *PEQ* 135 (2003): 37–53 (45).

17. O. Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah Between the Seventh and the Fifth Centuries B.C.E.,” in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 323–76 (364); Lipschits, *The Rise and Fall of Jerusalem*, 270. Unfortunately I had no access to the detailed archaeological material used by Lipschits when I wrote the historical chapters of my study early in the last decade of the twentieth century. See Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 88–90. Based on more general considerations, I calculated a loss of 50 percent of the population.

capital Mizpah, where a reduced urban civilization survived, most regions of Judah suffered heavy destructions,¹⁸ including also the rural areas of Northern Judah, as Avraham Faust has recently pointed out.¹⁹ Re-evaluating the population development in a long-term perspective, Faust even pleaded for a more severe demographic decline of up to 80 or 90 percent during the sixth century; it would have taken more than 250 years for the population of Judah to reach its former size in the Hellenistic period.²⁰ If one takes the growth of population during the 200 years of the Persian period into account, it must have started on a much lower level in order to make the average of 30 percent of the Iron Age population, which has been calculated for the *entire* period.²¹ Thus, even if one hesitates to follow these estimations, which never can be completely certain, one cannot escape the insight that the period of exile was connected with a considerable demographic decline in Judah.²²

Because I reckoned with a population of Judah of about 80,000 people at the eve of the deportations, I estimated about 40,000 inhabitants of Judah during the sixth century. Lipschits, *The Rise and Fall of Jerusalem*, 270, reckoned with a higher number of people (about 108,000 people) in seventh-century Judah; thus his higher rate of loss points at a similar number of about 40,000 inhabitants.

18. Also in the Northern Judean hills, according to Lipschits, *The Rise and Fall of Jerusalem*, 268–71, the population remained almost constant. On the basis of the results of salvage excavations carried through in the environment of Jerusalem, Faust, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.,” 39–43, has questioned this estimation. He pointed to several farmsteads and villages which did not survive the Iron Age. Yet O. Lipschits, “The Rural Settlement in Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.: A Rejoinder,” *PEQ* 136 (2004): 99–117 (101–3), has criticized the methodical limitations of Faust’s approach. Nevertheless, A. Faust, “Settlement Dynamics and Demographic Fluctuation in Judah from the Late Iron Age to the Hellenistic Period and the Archaeology of Persian-Period *YEHUD*,” in *A Time of Change: Judah and Its Neighbors During the Persian and Hellenistic Periods* (ed. Y. Levin; London: Continuum, 2007), 32–51 (46–49), may be right in stressing that in spite of a similar number of sites in this area that can be attributed to the late Iron and the Persian periods, there can be a higher degree of discontinuity between the settlements of the two periods.

19. Faust, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.,” 39–43, and “Settlement Dynamics and Demographic Fluctuation in Judah,” 46–49.

20. Faust, “Settlement Dynamics and Demographic Fluctuation in Judah,” 40–43.

21. C. E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (JSOTSup 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 246–47, already reckoned with about only 20 percent of the seventh-century population in the first part of the Persian period.

22. This view corresponds with the polemics against emigration to Egypt and promises for those who remained in the country, which can be seen in Jer 43:7–17. Obviously there was enduring danger of population loss during the sixth century because people emigrated to regions where there were better conditions to survive.

Of course, there are many indications that “life in Judah after 586... went on very much in the same way that it had done before the catastrophe,” as Barstad has pointed out.²³ As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, one can refer to Jer 40–43 or the book of Lamentations. Archaeological evidence points to flourishing oil and wine production in Mizpah and Gibeon. However, most of the public and economic activity was restricted to the Benjaminite region, which almost escaped the Babylonian destructions. There are other indications that point towards a discontinuity of economic and cultural life. Faust has pointed out that bench tombs and four-room houses, so typical for the Judean culture during monarchic period, especially in the eighth and seventh centuries, are virtually unattested during the sixth century.²⁴ Although some of the tombs were in use during the exilic period, none were newly hewn during the Persian period. Thus, the period of exile was also a period of cultural discontinuity and economic decline in Judah.

It seems that the economic decline has also to do with the foreign policy of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Although Barstad is generally right in stating that “it would have been nonsensical of Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Judah,”²⁵ it becomes ever more obvious that in contrast to the Assyrians, the Babylonians were much less interested in fostering their conquered countries.²⁶ David Vanderhooft has pointed out that only a few remains of Babylonian administration were found in Judah and the Levant.²⁷ I tried to show that the Babylonian kings—inspired by the foundation myth of their empire that they had to carry out Marduk’s revenge for Babylon—pursued an extreme one-sided centralized foreign policy.²⁸ Because they were most interested in exploiting the provinces

23. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land*, 42.

24. A. Faust, “Social and Cultural Changes in Judah During the 6th Century BCE and Their Implications for Our Understanding of the Nature of the Neo-Babylonian Period,” *UF* 36 (2004): 157–76 (160–69).

25. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land*, 67.

26. In contrast to Judah, the rural sites in the Samaritan hill country show a high degree of continuity between the Iron and the Persian age; see Faust, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.,” 43–45. The Assyrians not only resettled people from other parts of their empire in Samaria in place of the deported Israelites, but also rebuilt the destroyed cities and established an effective administration.

27. D. S. Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* (HSM 59; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 9–59, and “Babylonian Strategies of Imperial Control in the West: Royal Practice and Rhetoric,” in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp, eds., *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 235–62 (253–56); similarly, Lipschits, *The Rise and Fall of Jerusalem*, 188, 366.

28. Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 47–70.

for the benefit of the capital and the heartland, they did not invest parts of the royal income in the development of the provinces. It appears that only Amel-Marduk and Nabonidus attempted to change this one-sided policy, but both failed. One should also remember that Nebuchadnezzar, who was several times cheated by Zedekiah, “the king of his heart” whom he had chosen himself (*ANET* 564), obviously wanted to execute an extreme and severe punishment on the Judeans, because he decided to destroy the Jerusalem temple, although that act contradicted his own state ideology.²⁹ Moreover, the murder of his Judean governor Gedaliah, in addition to leading Babylonian officials, may have convinced Nebuchadnezzar that this province was incapable of cooperating with him and should be left devastated as it was.³⁰ Thus, the Babylonian policy concerning Judah was perhaps not as well-considered as Barstad presupposed.³¹

I am not yet sure that we should classify sixth-century Judah “as a post-collapse society,” as Faust has proposed,³² but I do think that it was a society which underwent serious political, social, cultural, and religious discontinuities during this period.

29. See R. Albertz, “Die Zerstörung des Jerusalemer Tempels 587 v. Chr.: Historische Einordnung und religionspolitische Bedeutung,” in *Zerstörungen des Jerusalemer Tempels: Geschehen—Wahrnehmung—Bewältigung* (ed. J. Hahn; WUNT 147; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 23–39.

30. The date of this murder is still a matter of debate. For example, Lipschits, *The Rise and Fall of Jerusalem*, 98–102, still dated it to the year of the destruction of Jerusalem (in his view 586 B.C.E.). Jer 41:1, however, does not mention a year, and it is probable that this detail got lost. Thus, it is more reasonable to date this event in the year 582, where Jer 52:30 reports a third deportation; cf. Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 94–96, and the many others mentioned by Lipschits, *The Rise and Fall of Jerusalem*, 100 n. 229. Perhaps also Nebuchadnezzar’s war against Ammon and Moab reported by Josephus (*Ant.* 10.181), which took place 582 or 580 B.C.E., had to do with this murder, because the king of Ammon seems also to have been involved (Jer 40:14; 41:15). I pleaded for adding the imprisonment of Jehoiachin, from which he was not released before the death of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 25:27–30) in connection with Gedaliah’s assassination, because the murderer was a member of the royal family, cf. Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 102–4. Thus, there is enough reason to explain why Nebuchadnezzar could have punished Judah more severely than other provinces of the southwestern corner of his empire.

31. It seems that the Babylonians caused less destruction in other regions than Judah, for example in the Southern coastal plain; cf. Faust, “Judah in the Sixth Century B.C.E.,” 44–45.

32. Faust, “Social and Cultural Changes in Judah,” 167–69, and “Settlement Dynamics and Demographic Fluctuation in Judah,” 43–46.

The Significance of Exile

In the historical debate on the reality of the Babylonian Exile it is often overlooked that this event had far-reaching consequences for the political, social, and religious history of Judah, which can only be explained if this event constituted not only a strong discontinuity in the course of Judean history, but also a traumatic experience for all those who survived the catastrophe. In order to estimate the long-lasting traumatic impact of this experience, one should remember that many books of the Hebrew Bible address and tackle this subject matter: the books Deuteronomy, Joshua, Samuel, and Kings as well as the prophetic book of Jeremiah lead to the exile and try to explain it. In Ezekiel, the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians constitutes the center of the whole book (Ezek 24). In the book of Isaiah, the humiliation and elevation of Zion has become the main topic. The Book of the Four (Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah) describes the exiles of Israel and Judah after the eighth century as a sequence of judgments of divine purification.³³ Lamentations and many of the Psalms complain about the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah (Lam 1–5; Pss 74; 79; 80), and Ps 89, the lament about the loss of the Davidic kingdom, is positioned at the turning point of the book of Psalms. In the books of the Pentateuch the exile twice constitutes the threatening future horizon (Lev 26; Deut 28; 32). Of course, in the books of Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah the exile is the central topic. And even in late books like Daniel, Tobit, and Judith the traumatic experience of exile is still mirrored. Thus, about 70 percent of the Hebrew Bible tackles the questions of how the catastrophe of exile was possible and what Israel can learn from it. Without the impact of this catastrophe, the Hebrew Bible would have received a completely different shape.

In detail, we can distinguish five different consequences:³⁴

(1) The Loss of Political and Cultic Institutions and Its Consequences

The ravages and deportations of 597 and 587 meant for Judah the loss of its existence as an independent state after only five hundred years of history. This had far-reaching consequences for the subsequent history of Judah, as well as the further development of ancient Israel's religion and, with that, early Judaism.

33. See my *Israel in Exile*, 204–45. J. Wöhrle, *Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuches: Entstehung und Komposition* (BZAW 360; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 241–84, elaborates the counter-concept to that of the Deuteronomistic History.

34. Cf. my similar description in Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 132–38.

The fall of the Judean monarchy and the destruction of Jerusalem were severe blows to the official Jerusalemite state theology, with its massive appeal to YHWH in support of state power. The guarantee that the Davidic monarch would endure forever (2 Sam 7), as well as the central tenet of Zion theology—that the presence of YHWH on Mount Zion made the city impregnable to external enemies (Pss 46:2–8; 48:4–8; Mic 3:11)—had been refuted by the course of history. With the exile, consequently, the dominant state-centered theology of the monarchy faded into the background, surviving only in more or less major revisions and became later a subversive motif of hope. The message of the prophets of judgment, which in the pre-exilic period had been an opposition theology rejected by the majority, came decisively to the foreground, including its bias toward political and social criticism. Now, it was able to explain the political catastrophe and enable those who survived to come to terms with it.

After the loss of political and cultic institutions, informal groups of theologians became ever more the vehicles of official YHWH-religion. Some of them gathered around the heritage of the prophets of judgment like the Jeremiah-Deuteronomists and priestly reform groups related to Ezekiel; others worked within the confines of the ancient power elites such as the editors of the Deuteronomistic history, whereas the Deutero-Isaiah group, which probably consists of former temple singers, could keep more distance because of its prophetic inspiration.

The result of this deregulation of religious traditions was an almost explosive increase of literary production and a splintering into various “theological schools” that went considerably beyond the divisions of the pre-exilic period. The more or less extensive separation of the official religious traditions from its political power base and from political responsibility opened the way to vast utopian designs for the future, but contained within itself the danger of a loss of contact with reality. Especially impressive are the utopian revisions of royal theology authored by the Deutero-Isaiah group and the temple theology by the disciples of Ezekiel. With deliverance from exile, the former expected an immediate establishment of God’s kingship within history, rendering a Davidic monarchy superfluous (Isa 40:9–11; 52:7–10). For the restoration, the disciples of Ezekiel had the vision of a temple, not only totally separate from the palace geographically, but also administered solely by the priests (Ezek 43:1–9). The monarchy would be severely limited in power and deprived of most of its sacral functions (Ezek 46:1–6).

In the historical arena, the emancipation of the priesthood from royal control imposed on it in the pre-exilic period was one of the most important developments of the exilic period. The most important theological innovation was the discovery of monotheism by the Deutero-Isaiah

group (Isa 41:4, 23–24, 27–29 etc.) and the Deuteronomists (Deut 4:35, 39). Without the collapse of the Judean state, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, and the connected theological problem whether these events demonstrated YHWH's impotence vis-à-vis the Babylonian gods, these innovations would not have been made.

(2) *The Loss of Territorial Integrity and Its Consequences*

The loss of the state and the associated displacement and resettlement of the Judeans and other forced migrations led to an irreversible disintegration of Israel's territorial integrity. The Babylonian Exile marks the beginning of Israel's life in the Diaspora, which has continued to this day.

The Israel of the exilic period comprised at least three geographically distinct groups: those who stayed behind, the Babylonian *Golah*, and the Egyptian *Golah*. These groups underwent different courses of historical development and had different political and religious interests, which frequently brought them into conflict. What bound these geographically distinct groups together was the loose bond of a common ethnic origin and a common religion. At least for the Babylonian *Golah*, the connection with the land from which they had been taken retained a religious and emotional significance (praying in the direction of Jerusalem [1 Kgs 8:48] and, later, pilgrimages [Dan 6:13]).

In consequence of this territorial separation, the religion of ancient Israel developed quite differently in the separate centers. The Judeans who emigrated to Egypt persisted conservatively in the Yahwism of pre-exilic provenance, interspersed with syncretism, whereas those who remained in Judah and the religious elites of the Babylonian *Golah* saw the exile as a chance and demand for a radical renewal of Yahwism along the line of the Josianic reform, that is, an opportunity to impose exclusive and aniconic worship of YHWH. Since the identity and survival of the Judeans in Babylonia were more threatened than in the homeland, the Babylonian *Golah* was responsible for many innovative religious and ritual safeguards (Sabbath, circumcision, and dietary laws). These innovations, coupled with the impressive structures created by the priestly reformers and the Deutero-Isaiah group, may have given rise to a self-assurance among the *Golah* that they, rather than those who stayed behind, could rightly claim the leadership role. Later influential figures from the Eastern *Golah*, figures such as Nehemiah and Ezra, tried to impose their more distinctive and rigid concepts of Yahwism, which had emerged under the minority conditions of their Diaspora, on the Judeans of the province.

(3) *The Revival of Kinship Based Organization and Its Consequences*

The loss of centralized power led to a strengthening of decentralized forms of organization based on kinship. In the Israel of the exilic period, the family or the clan became the primary social entity. The elders once more became a significant force and took on limited functions of local political leadership alongside with priests and prophets. Instead of a restored monarchy, after the exile a subnational polity was introduced, consisting of a council of elders, a congregation of priests, and a popular assembly. This development is connected directly with the positive experiences the community had with premonarchic forms of organization during the exilic period.

As a result of this shift, during this period the family also became more important in the religious sphere. In the pre-exilic period, family beliefs and rituals had long flourished freely alongside the observances of the official YHWH religion. Subsequent to the Josianic reform, they were more incorporated in the latter. In the deepest crisis of Israel's religion, after all the benefits promised by its salvation history had been lost, family piety played a supportive and substitutionary role that contributed substantially to the overcoming of crisis.

Family could play this role because—in contrast to official YHWH-religion—the relationship with God was based not on the deity's saving acts in history but on the creation of each individual (Pss 22:10–11; 71:5–6). Because this piety was rooted in creation, the historical catastrophe of exile was not a mortal blow. On the contrary, while YHWH seemed to be inaccessible to Israel as a whole during the exile, the individual survivors were soon able to sense YHWH's presence, protection, and support (e.g. when a child was born). These positive religious experiences in the sphere of family religion constituted a treasury on which the exilic congregations could draw in their worship, finding a new basis for confidence and hope that the historical catastrophe did not mean that YHWH has rejected his people (Isa 49:21; 64:7; Lam 3; Ezek 37:11). The Deutero-Isaiah group made use of this perspective in their oracles of salvation by grounding God's relationship with Israel in God's act of creation (Isa 43:1; 44:2, 21, 24; 54:5).

In addition, the family came to play a substitutionary role in preserving and transmitting the official YHWH-religion. New observances, created to safeguard Judean identity in the Babylonian *Golah*, either drew on family customs (circumcision, dietary regulations) or created new family observances (Sabbath). After the old institutional agencies had collapsed, families became the essential upholders of Israelite religion. The image

of Judaism as a family-centered religion has its genesis in the exilic period and is one of its most prominent consequences.

(4) *The Loss of Unquestioned National Identity and Its Consequences*

The fall of the Judean state put an end to the unquestioned presumption of a national identity. As long as the state existed, Judean identity was simply a given, part of life in the national community. It was incontrovertible, no matter how far an individual might stray from the religious and ethical norms of the society. And as long as there was a state, belief in YHWH was only one identifying mark among others: territorial, political, and language. Other ethnic markers played a much more important role in determining who belonged.

With the destruction of the state and the displacement of large portions of the population, this situation clearly changed. The exiles lived as an ethnic minority, scattered among several settlements, within a context of an alien majority. Those left behind still constituted a majority in some areas, but saw themselves increasingly exposed to the pressure of foreign immigrants and traders. Thus, for both groups, more or less, membership in the Judean community was no longer simply a given, but had to be demonstrated repeatedly by individual decisions. Confessional acts of religious faith took on critical importance in an entirely new way. The *Golah* especially went the way of assuring identity by introducing religious observances (circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath observance) as confessional badges that enabled the family to demonstrate publicly their membership in the community and to distinguish themselves from the majority of society. A family that did not observe the confessional practices excluded itself or could be excluded from the ethnic group. Thus, in the exilic period, Israel acquired for the first time characteristics of a religiously constituted community.

In the exilic and early postexilic periods we actually find a hybrid, a group constituted by elements both ethnic and religious. In the newly created kinship associations, the so-called *beit 'abot*, the ethnic principle obtained: only someone who could prove that he or his family was of Judahite or Benjaminite descent (Ezra 2:59; cf. 2:62–63) could be a member of the community. But the requirement that every family desiring to belong to this community had to go through a registration process (Neh 7:5) meant that the kinship principle ceased to be automatic. In the examination that was part of this process, the religious attitude of the family undoubtedly played an important role in reaching a positive or negative decision (cf. Ezra 6:21). The possibility that in serious cases of

refusal to observe confessional requirements or infidelity to the ancestral religion could result in exclusion is demonstrated by Ezek 13:9, and above all by the priestly legislation of the postexilic period associated with the phrase “this person shall be cut off from his people” (Gen 17:14; Lev 7:20–1, 27; 19:8 and in some variants).³⁵

(5) *More Contacts with Foreigners and Their Consequences*

The loss of state cohesion ultimately made the boundaries of the group more permeable to outside influences. Especially in the *Golah*, but also in the homeland, Judean families found themselves in constant confrontation—and not infrequently also in friendly contact—with other nationalities.

Constant contact with the other resulted in two very different attitudes toward these foreign neighbors. On the one hand, strict separation from the foreign nations was preached. The oracles against foreign nations, in particular, many of which date from the exilic period, proclaim God’s judgment on Israel’s hostile, covetous, or self-assured neighbors (Isa 15–20; Jer 46–49; Ezek 25–32). The boundless might of Babylon, with its totalitarian claims to authority, would soon be overthrown and suffer YHWH’s revenge (Isa 13–14; 21; 47; Jer 50–51).

On the other hand, the “survivors of the nations,” who like Israel had been victims of imperial Babylon, were invited by the Deutero-Isaiah group to share in the deliverance that YHWH was about to bring for his people (Isa 45:20–5); thus, they occasioned a momentous opening of the national religion of Israel toward universalism. These theologians never denied the special relationship existing between YHWH and Israel, but they gave Israel a new and positive mission to the Gentile world, transcending all boundaries, to be a witness on YHWH’s behalf (Isa 43:10–14; 44:8; 55:4), or YHWH’s servant to act towards the establishment of justice among the nations (42:1–4), the mediation of light to the nations (42:6; 49:6), or the expiation of sins of the nations through ancient Israel’s suffering (52:13–53:12). They even believed that people belonging to other nations would join ancient Israel (44:5; 55:5). During the exile, ancient Israel took on the features of a group defined at least in part by religious identity; this development contained within itself the chance for what was later to be a flourishing Jewish mission and the inclusion of the Gentiles by Christianity.

35. In Gen 17:14 it is related to those who refused circumcision, while in Exod 31:14 it is about those who did not observe the Sabbath.

Conclusion

If we become aware of all the political, social, and religious historical changes that are connected with the Babylonian Exile, we must admit that the exilic period represents the most profound caesura of all eras in Israel's history. Here, the religion of Israel underwent its most severe crisis, but here, too, the foundation was laid for its most sweeping renewal. Anyhow, in spite of its paramount significance for all subsequent history, the exile never became a foundation myth for later Judaism. It remained a traumatic historical experience, a frightening interruption of God's salvific history with ancient Israel, a historical lacuna, which was never filled out by later Judean historiography. "The myth of the empty land" was never told. Even in the conceptualizations of Chronicles it evidenced no function for the future. Therein, the picture of the empty land is used as a metaphor only for expressing that YHWH's history with his people was at a standstill during this period. The exile is more than a myth, if the term is meant in the sense of an "unhistorical invention," but it is less than a myth, if the term is meant in the sense of a "foundation history."