

Yahwistic Diversity and the Hebrew Bible

Tracing Perspectives of Group Identity
from Judah, Samaria, and the Diaspora
in Biblical Traditions

Edited by

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ISBN 978-3-16-158304-9 / eISBN 978-3-16-158305-6

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-158305-6

ISSN 1611-4914 / eISSN 2568-8367 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament, 2. Reihe)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset using Minion typeface and printed on non-aging paper by Laupp & Göbel in Gomaringen, and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

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The Diaspora as a Blessing for the Nations: The Case of Gen 28:14

KONRAD SCHMID

The Torah is a composite document that originated during the first millennium BCE.¹ There is no overlap between the historical period when its texts were written and the scenes which these texts present. Thus, the diaspora² of Israel and Judah that originated after the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE and the fall of Judah in 587 BCE is not a contemporaneous topic of the Torah, and it is not mentioned explicitly. Nevertheless, it is present in at least two ways. On the one hand, it is a striking feature of the Torah that it recounts the history of Israel as a people only outside of its land: Israel originates as a people within Egypt in Exod 1, and – except for the Transjordanian tribes – never sets foot in the promised land. Of course, the ancestors already dwell in the land, but they are depicted as individuals, and the main layer in Genesis, the Priestly texts, makes clear that they were “foreigners” in their own land.³ In other words: The Torah offers a myth of origins for a diasporic Israel. On the other hand, there are a few passages within the Torah that look ahead into or allude to the later history of Israel, such as the promises to the Patriarchs.⁴

1. The Diaspora as a Blessing for the Nations in the Jacob Story

In the story of Jacob’s dream at Bethel (Gen 28:10–22), there is an astonishing element in God’s speech to Jacob that presents a particular theological statement regarding the diaspora that – in the logic of the Bethel story – will only develop several centuries after Jacob’s dream:

¹ See, e. g., Römer, “Zwischen Urkunden”; idem, *Einleitung*, 120–168; Kratz, “Analysis”; Gertz et al., *Formation of the Pentateuch*; Dozeman, *The Pentateuch*.

² See Kiefer, *Exil und Diaspora*.

³ See Wöhrle, *Fremdlinge*.

⁴ See Kratz, “Verheißungen.”

Gen 28:14

וְהָיָה זְרַעְךָ כְּעֹפֶר הָאָרֶץ
 וְפָרְצְתָהּ יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצָפֹנָה וְנִגְבָּה
 וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה וּבְזֵרְעָהּ:

And your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed and in your offspring.

According to Gen 28:14, the diaspora, once it comes into existence, is not an expression of God's wrath against Israel or the result of divine punishment. Instead, the diaspora serves as a means of conveying God's blessing to the nations. Jacob, within the narrative framework of Gen 28:10–22, receives the promise to have numerous offspring, and this offspring will cover the earth.

In historical terms, it is impossible to deny that this perspective was written by an author who was aware of Israelites living in the diaspora. Whoever was responsible for the wording of Gen 28:14, this author tried to anchor a very positive evaluation of Israel's diaspora in the promise given to Jacob at Bethel.

This positive notion of the diaspora can also be observed in the specific language used in Gen 28:14. The verb for “being scattered” or “being spread” in Gen 28:14 is not נָדַח or פָּרַץ *hiphil*, as often used in Deuteronomy and the prophetic tradition, but פָּרַץ:

וְהָיָה זְרַעְךָ כְּעֹפֶר הָאָרֶץ
 וְפָרְצְתָהּ יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצָפֹנָה וְנִגְבָּה
 וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה וּבְזֵרְעָהּ:

And your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

The overall positive connotation of פָּרַץ can be seen in passages like Hos 4:10 or Isa 54:3.

Hos 4:10

וְאָכְלוּ וְלֹא יִשְׂבְּעוּ
 הֵזְנוּ וְלֹא יִפְרְצוּ
 כִּי־אֵת־יְהוָה עָזְבוּ

They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not *multiply*; because they have forsaken YHWH.

Isa 54:3

כִּי־יִמְיוֹן וְשִׁמְאוֹל תִּפְרְצִי
 וְזֵרְעָהּ אֹיְבִים יִרְשׁוּ וְעָרִים נְשֻׁמוֹת יוֹשְׁבוּ:

For you (2.sg.fem., i. e., Zion) will *spread* out to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will settle the desolate towns.

Israel's spreading according to Gen 28:14 thus has a different ring than in many judgment passages in the prophetic books (see below in more detail). Despite its specific message, the view of Gen 28:14 has not attracted much attention in the history of scholarship.⁵ Gunkel, for instance, was utterly unimpressed by this verse: "This prophecy differs from the specific words 13.15 by their watery position and is probably an addition."⁶

The disinterest of traditional scholarship in Gen 28:14 had to do with scholarly methods: the main goal was to attribute the texts of the Pentateuch to the different sources whose theological outline was already more or less known. Specific profiles, such as the diaspora theology of Gen 28:14, could therefore hardly come into view, especially since J and E, the alleged components of Gen 28:10–22, were traditionally dated to the preexilic period.

If one looks at Gen 28:14 without the glasses of the documentary hypothesis, it quickly becomes clear that Gen 28:14 is not a text that was written in isolation. It forms a tight network with Gen 12:2–3 and 13:14–16:

Gen 12:2–3

וְאֶשְׁשֹׁף לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ
וְאֶגְדַּלְתִּיךָ שְׁמֹךָ וְהָיָה בְרַכָּה:
וְנִבְרַכְךָ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [...] and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Gen 13:14–16

And YHWH said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward (וְרָאָה וְנִבְרַכְךָ וְנִבְרַכְךָ וְנִבְרַכְךָ וְנִבְרַכְךָ) for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth (כַּעֲפָר הָאָרֶץ), so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.

Although it cannot be established with certainty, Gen 12:2–3; 13:14–16; and 28:14 seem to belong to the same redactional layer within the patriarchal narratives and bind the Abraham and Jacob traditions together.⁷ If one accepts the

⁵ The commentaries of Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 554–555, and Seebass, *Vätergeschichte*, 317, fail to see the specific profile of Gen 28:14.

⁶ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 381: "Diese Weissagung unterscheidet sich von den konkreten Worten 13.15 durch ihre blasse Haltung und ist wohl Zusatz." Gunkel adhered to the Documentary Hypothesis and distributed the story of Gen 28:10–22 mainly (except for vv. 14, 19b, 21b, see *ibid.*, 317) among its alleged J and E strands, although this interpretation is at odds with the basic assumptions of how J and E were combined: In Gen 28:10–22, the E text is considered to be the base text, whereas the J elements were added to it. Usually, the Documentary Hypothesis holds the contrary to be the case: J is the basic layer, and R^{JE} added E to it. And this is also the reason why E is assumed to be preserved only in a fragmentary way. See the discussion in Seebass, *Vätergeschichte*, 321–322; Steck, *Exegese*, 179–211.

⁷ See Köckert, *Vätergott und Väterverheißungen*, 250–255.

view that these texts presuppose the existence of a diaspora, then a dating at least post 722 BCE is unavoidable.⁸ Given the focus of both the combined Abraham and Jacob tradition on an Israel including all twelve tribes, it is more probable that this network even postdates 587 BCE.⁹

The fact that YHWH reveals his message to Jacob in a dream in Gen 28:13–15 also seems to point to this era: In the book of Deuteronomy and in the Deuteronomistic passages of the book of Jeremiah, dreams are harshly condemned and excluded from being possible means of divine messages. This is different in Zech 1–6 or the Joseph Story,¹⁰ which might have influenced Gen 28:13–15:

“L’usage de la médiation onirique a pour effet de préparer l’histoire de son fils Joseph dans laquelle la divinité communique presque exclusivement par les songes.” (“The use of dream mediation has the effect of preparing the story of his son Joseph in which the divinity communicates almost exclusively through dreams.”)¹¹

It is well accepted in biblical research that Gen 28:10–22 is a text that has grown over time: The basic layer can be identified in Gen 28:11¹²–12, 16¹³, 17–19a and presents the *hieros logos* of Bethel.¹⁴ A first reinterpretation took place in Gen 28:10, 20–22, which inserted the story into a broader Jacob cycle (Gen 25–35), whereas Gen 28:13–15 seems to be the most recent part of the story, as it links to other key texts (mentioned above) establishing an overarching ancestral story in Gen 12–50. The redactional anticipations of several elements from Gen 28:20–22 indicate that v. 19b (ואולם לוז שם העיר לראשונה) seems to be a gloss which reflects the process of the transition of the name Bethel from the sanctuary to the nearby city of Luz after the sanctuary was abandoned.¹⁵

⁸ See Kratz, *Komposition*, 263, 267; idem, “Verheißungen,” 52.

⁹ See Köckert, “Verheißung I,” 34:697–704.

¹⁰ See Lanckau, *Herr der Träume*.

¹¹ Nocquet, *La Samarie*, 54.

¹² The self-standing character of this story may be questioned, as “Jacob” is not explicitly mentioned in 28:11. However, it is also possible to assume that through the introduction by 28:10, the name did not have to be repeated.

¹³ Only ייקץ יעקב משנתו.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Rendtorff, “Jakob”; Blum, *Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (see his retraction in idem, “*Noch einmal*”). It is contested whether יהיה נצב עליו (8:13a) was part of the original story. Whether or not the archaeology of Bethel helps us to date the earliest form of Gen 28 is contested; see Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz, “Reevaluating Bethel,” who argue that the sanctuary at Bethel was operative only until the late eighth century BCE, whereas Lipschits, “Bethel Revisited,” holds that this might have been the case until the sixth century BCE.

¹⁵ See, however, the different interpretation in Jericke, *Ortsangaben*, 186–187.

2. The Diaspora as a Curse in Deuteronomy 28

The position of Gen 28:14 is all the more conspicuous when read against the background of Deut 28. In this final curse section that serves as the end of the Torah in its present context,¹⁶ the diaspora is mentioned in several instances, but it has the exact opposite function from Gen 28:14. The diaspora does not serve as a blessing for the nations, but is the expression of God's wrath and punishment, and it serves as a byword and a horror for all nations. Deut 28:25a presents a war curse that seems to be taken from VTE § 65:¹⁷ The curse does not even allow the possibility of flight in a situation of distress. Deut 28:25b then expands this curse with the idea of Israel becoming a "horror" among the nations.

Deut 28:25

יִתְגַּדְּ יְהוָה וְנִגְדָה לְפָנַי אֲרֻבָּה
 בְּדַרְדָּרָה אֶחָד תִּצָּא אֵלָיו
 וּבְשִׁבְעָה דַרְכִים תִּנּוּס לְפָנָיו
 וְהָיִיתָ לְזִעְזֹה לְכָל מַמְלָכוֹת הָאָרֶץ:

YHWH will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways. And you shall become a horror for all the kingdoms of the earth.

It is plausible to interpret Deut 28:25 as a passage that interprets the existence of the diaspora in Deuteronomistic terms:¹⁸ Not being able to live in its own land and not being ruled by a Davidic king cannot be interpreted otherwise than as an expression of divine punishment.

A similar text can be found in Deut 28:37. This text ties in with Deut 28:33 ("a people you do not know")¹⁹ and is preceded in Deut 28:36, where not only the exile of the people, but also of the king is mentioned, thus presupposing Jehoiachin's deportation to Babylon and the revoking of the Deuteronomistic law of the king (Deut 17:14–20).²⁰

Deut 28:37

וְהָיִיתָ לְשִׁמָּה לְמִשְׁלַל וְלְשִׁנְיָה
 בְּכָל הָעַמִּים
 אֲשֶׁר־יִנְהַגְּךָ יְהוָה שָׂמָה:

And you shall become a destruction, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where YHWH will lead you.

¹⁶ See on the historical background of Deut 28 Steymans, *Deuteronomium 28*; idem, "Assyrische Vorlage"; idem, "Neuassyrische Vertragsrhetorik"; Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund*; Quick, *Deuteronomy 28*.

¹⁷ Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, 168.

¹⁸ Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 1995, 2008.

¹⁹ See Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 2010.

²⁰ See Pietsch, "Restauration und Resignation."

Deuteronomy 28:64–65 is addressed to the people in the second person sing., apparently stressing to its audience the perseverance of the judgement.²¹ Whoever had been deported into exile cannot claim that God’s judgement is over at any point.

Deut 28:64–65

וְהִפְצַדְךָ יְהוָה בְּכָל־הָעַמִּים
 מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ וְעַד־קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ
 וְעַבַדְתָּ שָׂם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים
 אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יַתְנֶעַת אֶתְּךָ וְאֶבְתִּיד עֵץ וְאֶבֶן:
 וּבְגוֹיִם הֵבֵם לֹא תִרְגָּע וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה מְנוּחַ לְכַפִּי־רַגְלֶךָ
 וְנַתְּוִי יְהוָה לֶךָ שֵׁם לֵב רָגֹז וּכְלִיוֹן עֵינַיִם וְדֹאֲבוּן גֹּפֶשׁ:

And YHWH will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods which neither you nor your ancestors have known – wood and stone. And among those nations you shall find no ease, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There YHWH will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a languishing spirit.

The motif that Israel will find “no resting place” (Deut 28:65) seems to be reminiscent of Lam 1:3, and in the following verses (Deut 28:66–68), specific polemics against the diaspora in Egypt seem to be implied (“YHWH will bring you back in ships to Egypt”).²²

To sum up: It is immediately obvious that the Torah in its prominent conclusion in Deut 28 presents a critical perspective on the diaspora: Being dispersed among all nations is the result of divine punishment, nothing else. In addition, this diaspora situation is explicitly termed a “curse” or a “byword,” in direct opposition to what Gen 28:14 states. It is difficult to establish a clear line of dependence between Gen 28:14 and the passages from Deut 28 just presented, as the redactional developments both of Gen 28 and Deut 28 are contested. Nevertheless, it is sufficiently clear that these texts interrelate to one another, for they use the same language, but present opposing theological concepts. Because Deut 28 holds the traditional expected position regarding the diaspora, one might tend towards the assumption that Gen 28 is reacting to Deut 28, but such a hypothesis would require a detailed diachronic assessment of the two texts.

3. Parallel Findings and Developments in the Prophetic Books

A similar discussion regarding the theological status of the diaspora can be found in the prophetic books, particularly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This is no coincidence, as these books pertain to the period of Judah’s exile. It is easily

²¹ See Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 2018.

²² See Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 2018–2019.

understandable that different interpretations of the diaspora found their way into these two books.

A striking case can be found in Jer 24.²³ The vision of the two baskets with figs in front of the temple concludes with the condemnation of the “bad figs”:

Jer 24:9

נתתים לזעונה לרעה
לכל ממלכות הארץ להרפה ולמשל לשניגה ולקלקלה
בכל המקומות אשר אדיתם שם:

I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth, a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them.

According to Jer 24:9, the diaspora is the obvious result of the condemnation of the Zedekiah generation.

The notion of the diaspora as expression of divine wrath can also be widely found in Ezekiel.

Ezek 11:16

לכו אמר כה אמר אדני יהוה
כי הרחקתים בגוים
וכי הפיצותים בארצות ואהי להם למקדש מעוט
בארצות אשר באו שם:

Therefore say: Thus says the Lord YHWH: Yes, I removed them far away among the nations, and yes, I scattered them among the countries, and I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone.

It is, however, noteworthy that the diaspora community is not completely forsaken by God in this passage. He admits being “a sanctuary to them” abroad “for a little while.” The Ezekiel tradition, tracing itself back to a prophet who had been exiled himself, seems not overly hostile towards the diaspora.

Apparently, the tradition even reached a point where the gathering and return of the diaspora could be envisioned:

Ezek 11:17

כן אמר כה אמר אדני יהוה
אקבצתי אתכם מן הגוים
ואספתי אתכם מן הארצות אשר נפצתם בהם
ונתתי לכם את אדמת ישראל:

Therefore say: Thus says the Lord YHWH: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.

²³ See Schmid, *Buchgestalten*, 253–269. See also, but differently, Stipp, “Jeremia 24: Geschichtsbild”; idem, “Jeremiah 24: Deportees.”

The same is also true for the book of Jeremiah, where similar statements can be found, e. g. in Jer 23.²⁴

Jer 23:7–8

לִכְּנֹהֵן יָמַימִים בָּאִים נֹאמְרֵיהֶנּוּ
 וְלֹא־לְאִמְרוֹ עוֹלַיִם יְהוָה אֱשֶׁר הֶעֱלָה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
 כִּי אִם־חִי־יְהוָה אֱשֶׁר הֶעֱלָה וְאֱשֶׁר הֵבִיא
 אֶת־יָרֵעַ בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ צְפוֹנָה וּמִכָּל־הָאֲרָצוֹת אֲשֶׁר הִדְחִיתִים שָׁם וְיָשְׁבוּ עַל־אֲדָמָתָם

Therefore, the days are surely coming, says YHWH, when it shall no longer be said, ‘As YHWH lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt,’ but ‘As YHWH lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.’ Then they shall live in their own land.

In the LXX, Jer 23:7–8 is placed directly before Jer 24, thus correcting the condemnation of the diaspora in Jer 24:9 in an anticipatory way.

Even the book of Deuteronomy does not stop with only condemnation of the diaspora. Ultimately, God will bring his people home, regardless of how far away they are from their land:

Deuteronomy 30:4

אִם־יְהִינָה גְדָחַךְ בְּקִצְהָ הַשָּׁמַיִם
 מִשָּׁם יִקְבְּצֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּמִשָּׁם יִקְחֶךָ:

If you are exiled to the end of the heaven, from there YHWH your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back.

As Deut 30:3 makes clear, it is, however, only due to God’s mercy that this situation will eventually be reversed.

It seems as if the concerns for the worldwide diaspora community eventually prevailed in the Hebrew Bible, even in books whose main bodies show little compassion for those who were exiled to foreign countries.

4. The Final Perspective in Gen 28:15: The Return to the Homeland

Unlike the Joseph Story, which seems to hold that living abroad is a legitimate possibility for Israel,²⁵ Gen 28:15, as a continuation to Gen 28:14, states that God will eventually end the diaspora situation:

²⁴ See Schmid, *Buchgestalten*, 269–277.

²⁵ See Schmid, “Josephsgeschichte”; Römer, “Joseph Story.” A different position is taken by Blum and Weingart, “Joseph Story”; see also Albertz, “Josephsgeschichte,” especially 20, 25; Wöhrle, “Joseph.”

Gen 28:15

וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכָל אֶשְׁרֵי-תְלַךְ
 וְהָשִׁבְתִּיךָ אֶל-הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת
 כִּי לֹא אֲעֻזְבֶּךָ
 עַד אֲשֶׁר אִסְעֵשְׂיָתִי אֶת אֶשְׁרֵי-בְרַתִּי לְךָ:

Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

This promise seems to be the result of an intrabiblical exegesis of Gen 28:22, which is taken up and reinterpreted in Gen 28:15:

וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכָל אֶשְׁרֵי-תְלַךְ
 וְהָשִׁבְתִּיךָ אֶל-הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת
 כִּי לֹא אֲעֻזְבֶּךָ
 עַד אֲשֶׁר אִסְעֵשְׂיָתִי אֶת אֶשְׁרֵי-בְרַתִּי לְךָ:

Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

In Gen 28:22, Jacob's return pertains to the figure of Jacob in the narrative, whereas in Gen 28:15 Jacob is conceived as the people he represents, and Jacob's return implies the homecoming of his descendants.

It is, of course, difficult to decide whether Gen 28:15 belongs to the same redactional layer as Gen 28:14. If so, then the diaspora-friendly perspective of Gen 28:14 would entail a perspective of return from the beginning; otherwise, such a perspective would be the result of a *Fortschreibung*. Another possibility that cannot be excluded is that Gen 28:14 was secondarily inserted before Gen 28:15 in order to highlight the specific theological purpose of the diaspora.

Conclusion

The Persian-period shape of the non-Priestly Jacob Story takes a unique stance towards the diaspora in Gen 28:14 (and Gen 12:1–3): The diaspora is not the result of an accident in history or the just punishment of Israel for its sin. Instead, it is a preconceived element of the manner in which God's blessings find their way into the world, and this is revealed from the very beginnings to Jacob. It directly opposes prophetic statements such as those in Deut 28, Jer 24, or Ezek 11. The diaspora will not serve as a "proverb" or a "byword" but as a trajectory for "blessing."

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