

Judah's Reaction to the Babylonian Exile

Shawn Zelig Aster, Bar-Ilan University

Historical Background of the Babylonian Exile

The Babylonian exile was not a single event, but a series of deportations, which resulted from several Babylonian conquests of the kingdom of Judah in the early sixth century BCE. Before investigating Judah's reaction to these, we will describe how the Babylonian empire came to dominate the kingdoms in the southern Levant (including Judah) late in the seventh century BCE, after the weakening and withdrawal of the Assyrian empire. During what eventually proved to be a brief interlude between Assyrian and Babylonian domination, Josiah, king of Judah (reigned 639-609 BCE), pursued an independent policy, expanding Judah's borders to the north and west. After nearly a century as an Assyrian vassal state, Judah longed for an opportunity to regain its independence, and Josiah seems to have acted on this longing. He met his death at Megiddo, attempting to block an Egyptian attempt to succour the embattled Ashur-uballit, last king of the Assyrian empire. (As the Assyrian empire weakened, Egypt allied with Assyria in the expectation of supplanting the Assyrian empire in Syro-Palestine.) Josiah's death signalled to Judah that the decline of the Assyrian empire would not lead to a new resurgence of Judah. Rather, the remnants of the Assyrian empire would be contested by Babylonia and by Egypt. The lack of certainty over which of these two contestants would prevail led Judah to a policy of vacillating loyalties, which ultimately led to the exile.

In the initial post-Josiah period, the Egyptians, who were geographically much closer to Judah, viewed Judah as subservient to them. But in 605 BCE, Babylon defeated Egypt at the battle of Carchemish (in what is now Northern Syria) and a year later conquered Ashkelon, putting a tentative end to Egypt's domination of the Levant (as described in II Kings 24:7). Thereupon, Jehoiakim, king of Judah (609-598 BCE) briefly transferred Judah's loyalty to Babylonia. But in 601, in a battle between Babylonia and Egypt on the Egyptian frontier, Egypt emerged ascendant. At that point, Jehoiakim transferred Judah's loyalty to Egypt (II Kings 24:1). The repeated transfers infuriated the Babylonians, who two years later launched a major show of force directed at Jerusalem. Early in 597 BCE, they conquered Jerusalem. In several stages,

approximately 10,000 Judeans, most of whom were from the wealthier urban elite of Jerusalem, were deported to Babylonia. These included Jeconiah (also called Jehoiachin), the king of Judah, who had succeeded his father Jehoiakim, and other members of the political and religious leadership of Judah.

Zedekiah, Jehoiakim's brother, was appointed vassal king under Babylon. His portrayal in the book of Jeremiah shows him to be a weak figure, unable to navigate the vicissitudes of the international situation. Jeremiah very clearly counselled him against further diplomatic vacillation, and encouraged acceptance of Babylonian domination. This was the only practical political course, and Jeremiah interpreted the political reality as reflecting God's plan: "Behold, I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon my servant..." (27:6) Nevertheless, Zedekiah was unable to withstand pressure from his courtiers who encouraged activity against Babylonian rule. In 594/3, representatives from the kingdoms south and east of Judah, Edom, Moab and Ammon, along with those of the Phoenician city-states Tyre and Sidon met in Jerusalem (27:3) to concert action against Babylon. In the years 592-588, Egypt appeared to be gaining the upper hand in the region, and Babylon was weakened by internal turmoil. In 592, Pharaoh Psammetichus II undertook a voyage to the southern Levant, which can be seen as a military campaign, and Babylonia did not recover from its internal turmoil until 588. These actions encouraged Zedekiah to revolt against Babylon during this period, leading to the final Babylonian conquest, beginning in 588 and ending in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. A further series of exiles were conducted, including exiles from the rural sector, and a subsequent process of selective deportation of people deemed useful to Babylonians, described in Jeremiah 40:1 as taking place at Ramah, north of Jerusalem.

The Babylonians took pains to destroy the city of Jerusalem so as to uproot any possibility of future Judean political independence and thereby avoid subsequent rebellious activity, to which they considered the Judahites addicted. Military centers outside of Jerusalem were destroyed, and the rural sector throughout Judah underwent a process of collapse. In the region north of Jerusalem (known as the "Land of Benjamin" due to the tribal inheritance of Benjamin in that region), at sites including Tell en-Nasbeh (Mizpah), Tell el-Ful (Gibeah) and el-Jib (Gibeon), activity continued into the sixth century. (The duration and extent of this activity is hotly debated among archaeologists.) At Mizpah in this region, the Babylonians appointed Gedaliah, son of Ahikam of the Shaphan family, as governor of the new province of Judah. The Shaphan family

had been officials in the royal court of Judah for some generations; it appears that the Babylonians took care to appoint someone who knew the business of administering Judah but who was not a member of the royal family and therefore could not act as the focal point of an anti-Babylonian rebellion. For a brief period, Gedaliah was able to encourage the Jews who were not exiled to try to pick up the pieces and live on the land under Babylonian rule. Addressing the remains of the Judean army, he is said to have counselled: “Do not fear to serve the Chaldeans. Dwell in the land, and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be good for you. Here I am, I sit at Mizpah to stand before any Chaldeans who come upon us. You, then, gather wine and dried figs and oil and store them in your vessels, and dwell in the cities that you have taken” (Jeremiah 40:9-10). He describes a process of limited recovery from collapse: those who remain in the land gather the abandoned late-summer produce and take refuge in the abandoned cities, whose protection offered a better chance of surviving than in villages and hamlets. But once again, Judahites unable to accept the reality of loss of political independence rebelled: Ishmael son of Nethaniah, a member of the royal family, attacked and killed Gedaliah during the seventh month (Jeremiah 41:1-2 and II Kings 25:25-26). The assassination may have been encouraged by rivalry from the Ammonite king Baalis (40:14) but clearly resulted from a refusal to accept the difficult political reality. Although the assassination furthered the process of collapse, leading additional Judahites to flee the land (Jeremiah 42-44), some Judahites clearly remained in the land throughout the exile. Struggling to survive in a region peripheral to the Babylonian empire, with little remaining of the social, religious, and political infrastructure of pre-exilic Judah, must have been a challenging undertaking.

Jeremiah’s Theology of Babylonian Domination

From before the 597 exile, Jeremiah seems to have accepted the loss of Judah’s political sovereignty, without this loss impugning the notion of Divine sovereignty in the world. He interpreted the impending destruction as resulting from God’s command, going so far as to call Nebuchadnezzar God’s “servant” who fulfilled His design. Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilling God’s decision to punish Judah for violating Judah’s covenant: not its loyalty oath to Nebuchadnezzar, but its age-old covenant with God. The violation of this covenant consisted largely (but not solely) in Judah’s acceptance of idolatry. The real rebels against God were those who advocated fighting for Judah’s sovereignty at all costs. Thus, in 25:9-10, after detailing Judah’s sins and repeated prophetic calls for return: “Therefore, thus says YHWH of Hosts, because you have not

heard my words. Behold, I will take all the kingdoms of the north, says YHWH, and send to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon my servant, and bring them to this land, upon its inhabitants and upon all the nations around..." Perhaps intentionally, the language of the passage, using the verbs "take" and "bring" evokes the language of Exodus 6:6-8, in which God promises to "take" the Israelites as His nation and bring them into the Land. This evoking highlights that the Babylonian domination results from God's decision to suspend his grant of the land to the Israelites due to covenant violations.

The same passage, however, continues by setting a limit on the time of the Babylonian domination (seventy years in 25:11). The possibility of a return of Israelite sovereignty after that period is raised in those verses and is masterfully expounded in Jeremiah 32, in the story of the field of Hanamel, and in the prophecy of Rachel in Jeremiah 31:14-16: "Thus says YHWH: A voice is heard at Ramah (the location from which the exiles departed, according to 40:1), a bitter plaintive cry, Rachel is mourning for her sons, refusing to comfort herself for her sons, for they are gone. Thus says YHWH: Restrain your voice from crying and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward to your actions, and they shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope to your future generations, says YHWH, and sons shall return to their borders." Scholars have debated the extent to which these passages of consolation reflect Jeremiah's actual words, and some view them as later additions, of the exilic period. It has been argued that Jeremiah expected the future of Judah to repose not in those who were exiled, but in the community that would remain in Judah under Babylonian domination (possibly seeing 32:37 fulfilled in the re-settlement under Gedaliah narrated in 40:11). Regardless of this debate, it is clear that Jeremiah articulated a theology according to which the sovereignty of YHWH and the survival of some remnant of Judah were not negated by Babylonian domination of the land of Israel.

As seen in the Gedaliah episode, an important part of the shock Judah experienced in this period resulted from the removal of the royal family from the kingdom. Jeremiah seems to respond to this loss by portraying other figures who take on the king's role of defending the population against the Babylonians. One of those is certainly Gedaliah, whom the book of Jeremiah describes as saying "Here I am, I sit at Mizpah to stand before any Chaldeans who come upon us" (Jeremiah 40:10). But another such figure is the prophet himself, who is appointed in language reminiscent of the Babylonian king "Behold, I appoint you this day upon nations and kingdoms to abandon and to pull down and to lay waste and to destroy and to build and to plant"

(Jeremiah 1:10). In this formulation, the prophet is portrayed as a sort of equal of the king of Babylon. Further on in the same chapter (1:18), he is described as defending Judah against its enemies. Clearly, the prophet was not a military leader and could not actually defend Judah. But in a very real sense, he was a more effective defender of Judah than the king: he articulated a theology which allowed Judah to survive the loss of political independence, and to retain its commitment to its covenant with God.

The Exiled Community in Babylon

The royal family did, however, survive the exile, along with most of those deported to Babylonia. Several factors coalesced in ensuring that those deported survived as an ethnic community and even flourished. Babylonian policy provided that deportees from different regions were to be settled in ethnically-grouped towns in southern Babylonia, and were not expected to assimilate ethnically into the surrounding population. (The nature of the pre-deportation population in southern Babylonia, which consisted largely of temple estates and tribal regions, may have been a factor motivating this policy.) Deportees, including those from Judah, were given royal land grants and were expected to participate in developing trade in the Babylonian economy. Neo-Babylonian economic documents from several archives, including those of Sippar, those of the Mursashu family, and those known as the Al-Yahudu documents, inform us about the economic activity of deportees and others in this region. These documents also allow research into the names given to deportees in this region, including Judahites. Prosopographical research, allowing the tracing of genealogies and describing the economic activity of these families, is ongoing. These documents show that individuals in several towns in southern Babylon, near the city of Nippur, retained Yahwistic names from the time of the deportations well into the fourth century. (Yahwistic names are those that include the name of God in the form “yah,” and are clear indicators of Judeans or Israelites. Semachiah, Zedekiah, and Jehoiakin are examples of such names.) Bearers of Yahwistic names can be presumed to be Judahites, and their names demonstrate that deportees from Judah retained their ethnic identity for at least two centuries following the deportations. This identity included a retention and development of the textual culture of pre-exilic Judah.

Alongside their ancestral textual culture, these documents show that the exiled Judahites were not isolated from Babylonian literary and scribal culture, a point to which we will return below

in discussing interactions between the prophetic texts produced in this community and Babylonian literary ones.

From the time of the first exile (597 BCE), political tension existed between the exilic community and the Jews who remained in the Land of Israel, a tension reflected in Jeremiah 24. Since the exilic community included the king and the leadership, and expected in some way to return to Judah, it could legitimately claim to constitute the continuity of the Judean polity. Those who remained in the land could also claim this, and Ezekiel 33:24-29 is one of many texts that reflects this tension: "Son of man, the dwellers among the ruins in the land of Israel are saying 'Abraham was only one, but he inherited the land, and yet we are many, so the land has been given to us as an inheritance'" (Ezek. 24:9). The verse describes how those who remained in the land ("dwellers among the ruins," following the description in Jeremiah 40:9-10 above), saw themselves as legitimate heirs of the promise of inheriting the land, given to the patriarchs and actualized in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Despite their small number, they affirm that they are not fewer than Abraham, and have rights to the land. Ezekiel skewers this assertion, noting that the inheritance of the land is conditional, and requires fulfilling divine law. Therefore, he implies, it is the guardians of the laws who ought to inherit the land, and membership in either of the rival communities does not suffice to achieve the status of heir.

Ezekiel Asserts the Power of YHWH Using Mesopotamian Imagery

Ezekiel's position on the rival merits of the communities is an outgrowth of the basic theological position that he and Jeremiah share in confronting the crisis of exile: the enduring power of YHWH and His sovereignty over the land, despite the exile. As sovereign, He retains the right to assign the land to those He chooses; this position negates the view attributed to the community remaining on the land "YHWH does not see us; YHWH has left the land" in Ezek. 8:12. In a series of oracles in Ezekiel chapters 8-11, the prophet describes how the "Presence of God" (Heb.: כבוד א-להי ישראל, elsewhere, כבוד ה') gradually departs from the Temple Gate to a location on the "mountain to the east of the city" (11:23), where it remains in the land of Judah, awaiting its triumphant return to the Temple. (This return is described in Ezekiel 43:1-6, and will be discussed below.)

The concept of the "Presence of God" forms an important avenue through which to explore Ezekiel's interactions with Babylonian divine representations. In popular thought, the plundering

of the Temple of YHWH in Jerusalem by the Babylonians represented the eclipse of the power of YHWH and the ascendancy of the reigning gods of Babylon. In a skillful and complex portrayal that integrates earlier Biblical and Mesopotamian motifs, and that references mythic and artistic imagery, Ezekiel parries this claim.

Ezekiel uses the term "Presence of YHWH" or "Presence of God," which often describes visions of God in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, to build a case for the enduring power of YHWH. The most detailed description of the "Presence of God" appears in Ezekiel's vision in chapter 1, which he sees at the Chebar canal, a location near Nippur. The location is significant, as it shows that YHWH is not geographically limited, and can appear in Babylon, and retains His power outside the Land of Israel. The detailed and luminous description seems to dovetail with artistic portrayals of the god-in-winged-sundisk found both in Neo-Assyrian art and in subsequent Neo-Babylonian portrayals. In the Neo-Assyrian period, we find such portrayals in the reliefs of the ninth-century king Assurnasirpal II, where the portrayal seems to represent the god Assur. In the Neo-Babylonian period, Shamash, the "great lord" is represented in this way in reliefs from the period of Nabona'id (Nabonidus, 556-539 BCE). In both periods, the god represented in this manner is the senior member of the pantheon.¹ Ezekiel's use of such imagery to describe YHWH in his vision on the canal in chapter 1 is intended to convey YHWH's power by depicting Him in the imagery typically used for Mesopotamian chief gods. At the base of the vision are objects or creatures called "*ofanim*" (Ezek. 1:15-18), a Biblical term elsewhere used for chariot wheels (Exod. 14:25). By using a wheeled vehicle used in symbolic processions of Babylonian gods, the vision also conveys that YHWH's power is not limited to the Land of Israel. Ezekiel effectively argues in this vision for the idea of YHWH as a universal, powerful God, whose power has not been diminished by the destruction of His Temple.

The concept of a Temple-less God was no doubt grating for Ezekiel's audience, ensconced as it was in close proximity to the major Babylonian temples, with their great economic and religious influence. Partly for that reason, Ezekiel repeatedly refers back to the radiant imagery he

¹ The use of the sun-disk to represent these gods seems to correspond to the literary use of *melammu* imagery to describe certain gods in both the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian texts. *Melammu* is a very ancient Akkadian term (taken from the Sumerian) which often expresses the overwhelming and insuperable power of a king or god who is victorious in war. Because power is often pictorially represented as radiance, *melammu* becomes equated with radiance in texts from the eighth century on. For more on this subject, see Shawn Zelig Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Akkadian Melammu and its Biblical Parallels* (AOAT 386; Münster: Ugarit, 2012), 100-107.

develops in his vision in chapter 1 throughout his prophecies. One of these, which begins in 3:22 with a vision described as "like that which I saw on the Chebar canal," emphasizes that no power superior to YHWH will conquer Jerusalem and destroy the Temple, but rather that YHWH Himself ordains the siege, the hunger, and destruction narrated in 5:1-4. It is YHWH Himself who destroys Jerusalem, due to its sins. The emphasis on the sins of the city is repeated in the next cycle of visions centering around the "Presence of God" motif, in chapters 8-11, in which God's Presence is said to journey out of the Temple, disgusted by the sins performed therein. Ironically, the humans with the power to destroy Jerusalem are not the Babylonians in this vision, but the Jews themselves, who cause the Divine Presence to leave due to their sins. Despite the Divine Presence's appearance on the Chebar canal in chapter 1, the Divine Presence in 11:23 is described sitting and waiting on the mountain to the east of Jerusalem. Ezekiel thus argues against the idea that God is limited to a specific geographic sphere, and argues that He is universal, non-corporeal, and not limited by time, space, or architecture.

In the description of God's triumphant return, Ezekiel makes his most detailed use of this motif in conjunction with the Temple. Part of his rebuilt Temple vision (chapters 40-48), 43:1-6 explicitly refers back to the visions on the Chebar canal and in chapters 8-11. This vision refers back to Exodus 40:34-38 and II Kings 8:10-11, in both of which the Presence of God (כבוד ה') is said to fill the sanctuary, first the portable Tabernacle of the Desert (in Exodus) and then Solomon's Temple (in Kings). The vision Ezekiel describes overwhelms the senses and gives a nearly-palpable description of God's power, as He leaves his temporary abode-in-exile on the mountain east of the city and enters the Temple: "Behold, the Presence of the God of Israel came from the eastern direction, and His voice was like the voice of many waters, and the land shone from His Presence...The Presence of YHWH entered the house through the gate which faced the road to the east." (Ezek. 43:2-4).

The "Return to Zion" in Prophetic Imagery

It was left to the prophet of Isaiah 40-66 to translate Ezekiel's visions of Divine power, returning triumphantly to the Temple, to the far more pedestrian reality of the "Return to Zion" that followed Cyrus' declaration. While those in the exilic community influenced by Ezekiel's visions may have expected a triumphant and clamorous return to the Temple, the reality in the years following 538 BCE was quite different. Small groups of Judean exiles returned to Jerusalem, an impoverished city. Unable to build a Temple structure, they had to satisfy

themselves with an altar in the location of the original Temple, on which intermittent sacrifices could be offered. In the oracles gathered in Isaiah 40-48, the prophet sought to encourage the exilic community to participate in the process of Return, despite the gloomy economic realities obtaining in the Land of Israel. Isaiah 40:1-11 seems to be one of the first of these oracles. In announcing that the term decreed for Jerusalem's service has been fulfilled (40:2), the prophet gives religious legitimacy to the process of return initiated by Cyrus. In this announcement, he implicitly refers to the statement in Jeremiah 29:10 "Before Babylon has completed seventy years, I will remember you and establish upon you my positive promise, returning you to this place." Significantly, Isaiah 40-66 nowhere engages the expectation, so prominent in Deuteronomy 30:3, that repentance must precede the return. From the argumentation in Isaiah 40-66, especially in 40-48, it appears that many members of the exilic community harbored serious doubts as to whether a process so transparently convenient to Cyrus' international political agenda, and apparently disconnected from religious action, was in fact the divinely-ordained process of return of the Jews to their ancestral land. In arguing that Cyrus' declaration began the process of return ordained by YHWH, the author of Isaiah 40-48 deploys a range of rhetorical strategies.

These are on display in 40:1-11. After announcing that Jerusalem's term of service is complete (40:2), he then calls for a road to be cleared on the wilderness, a straight road on the path of which "every valley shall be uplifted" (40:3-4). He does not reveal who is to travel on this cleared road, but simply notes that "the Presence of YHWH" will be revealed, without defining the nature of this Presence. Several verses later, in vv. 9-11, he explains its nature:

(9)Go up to a high mountain, announcer of Zion, raise your voice powerfully, announcer of Jerusalem, raise it and do not fear, say to the cities of Judah: 'Here is your God'. (10) Here, the Lord God will come with strength, and with His masterful arm, His reward is with Him and his deserts before Him. (11) Like a shepherd He will shepherd his flock, in His arm He gathers sheep, and carries them in His chest, the nursing sheep He will lead.

Verse 9 announces the arrival of God, in a somewhat unexpected guise. He leads those who have travelled to reach the cities of Judah. In verse 10, He is described as a warrior, with his captives

going before him, and in verse 11, like a shepherd, whose flock precedes him. In the imagery of each verse, the humans precede God, who “leads from the rear.” The imagery refers to the Judeans returning to the ruined cities, and describes this return, in v. 9, as the triumphant arrival of God. This arrival seems to explain and complete the reference to the appearance of the “Presence of YHWH” in 40:5. In Isaiah 40:3-5 and 9-11, therefore, the prophet describes the return of Judeans to their cities as constituting the appearance of the “Presence of YHWH.” The returning Judeans (who need the straight road described in 40:3-4) are visible as described in 40:10-11, while the same verses describe how God stands behind them.

This passage may be read as a reference to Ezekiel’s prophecy in 43:1-6, announcing the triumphant appearance of the Presence of YHWH. Here, the Presence of YHWH is revealed not in the Temple, but rather in the physical return of tired and weak Jews to the cities of Judah. The prophecy therefore articulates an entirely different perspective on the process of return and restoration than that found in Ezekiel 43:1-6, in that it sees the Presence of YHWH in the ordinary workings of the returning Jews. He focusses not on the return to the Temple, but on the return to the Land, and argues that God is present in the return of the people to the “cities of Judah.”

Neo-Babylonian Religious Imagery in Isaiah 40-48

Other passages in Isaiah 40-48 engage directly not with other Biblical prophecies but with motifs from Babylonian religious literature. The context of these polemics suggests that they are not designed primarily to uproot acceptance of Babylonian religious ideologies. Rather, they are part of the prophet’s agenda of arguing that the process of return initiated by Cyrus’ declaration was ordained by YHWH. As is well known, Cyrus was a Persian conqueror who took great pains to present himself as a king acceptable to Babylonians. In his cylinder inscription, a propaganda text designed for Babylonian consumption, he portrays himself as chosen for rulership by the god Marduk, the traditional head of the Babylonian pantheon, to whom the main temple of Babylon was dedicated. We can reasonably hypothesize that exposure to this propaganda exacerbated the feelings of members of the exilic community who wondered how any declaration issued by a patently idolatrous king could represent a process ordained by YHWH. In 45:1-13, the prophet clearly describes Cyrus as the anointed of YHWH, who assists him for the sake of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The prophet takes aim at the assertion that Cyrus is an emissary of Marduk, and at some essential elements of Marduk theology.

The “legal dispute” (Heb., *rib*) passage at 41:1-5 demonstrates this. The passage begins with a call to all the nations to come and defend themselves in a court case, in which God acts as plaintiff. As such, God asks them who awakened Cyrus and enabled his victories? Who “gave before him nations, and subdued kings” (v. 2), leading him to peacefully pass on paths he had never previously trod on (v. 3)? The questions evoke the language of Cyrus’ cylinder, in which Cyrus states that Marduk caused nations to bow in submission to him, and then went at his side, alongside his vast army, and made him enter Babylon without fighting. The prophet affirms that God, not Marduk, sent Cyrus, but goes beyond this affirmation. The answer to God’s questions in v. 4 includes a directed critique of Marduk: YHWH, says the prophet, is “first and present with the most recent ones.” The idea that YHWH was the primordial, that He existed before time, recurs several times in these chapters, including 41:23, 41:26, 44:6, 46:10; and 48:12. These claims are an attack on the Marduk theology known to us from *Enuma Elish* and other works, in which Marduk came into being several generations after creation, prior to the cosmic combat with Tiamat which made him pre-eminent.

Several passages in Isaiah 40-48 emphasize God’s role in creating the universe, and connect creation to His appointment of Cyrus. 42:5-6 are an example of the connection between these claims:

(5) Thus says the God YHWH, creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, establisher of the earth and its appendages, who gives life to people upon it and spirit to those who walk on it. (6) I YHWH have called you victoriously and held your hand, and have created you and turned you into a nation of covenant, a light unto nations.

We find that the claims in vv. 5b-6 have close parallels in the Cyrus cylinder. These include:

- a. God gives life to people who walk on the earth. This corresponds to the claim in lines 18-19 that Cyrus revived “the dead” of Babylon, referring to those who had been oppressed under the rule of the prior king, Nabonidus.
- b. God turned Cyrus into a “light unto nations.” This corresponds to the claim in the same lines that the revived people of Babylon rejoiced at Cyrus’ kingship and “their faces shone.”

In this passage, God asserts that He has accomplished what others attribute to Cyrus, and this explains the subsequent verse: “I am YHWH, that is My name, and I will not give My Honor to another, nor My praise to idols” (40:8). Interestingly, the claim which opens the passage, viz., that God is creator of the skies and earth finds no parallel in the Cyrus cylinder. The reason for this is clear, and is related to the recurring emphasis on God as creator in these chapters (43:1, 44:23-24, 45:7, and 48:13). The author of Isaiah 40-48 is acutely aware that Marduk, to whom Cyrus ascribes his victories, could not claim to be the creator-god, according to the theology articulated in *Enuma Elish*. The prophet therefore emphasizes YHWH’s role as Creator, in order to emphasize His superiority over Marduk. By emphasizing the superiority of YHWH, he undermines the claim that Marduk sent Cyrus, and simultaneously undercuts the corollary to this claim, viz., that Cyrus’ invitation to the Jews to return is unrelated to YHWH’s promise of return.

Contrast to Creation Narratives in Torah

The use of *Enuma Elish* tropes to subvert political claims in Isaiah 40-48 forms an interesting contrast to the implicit polemic with such literature in the Torah. In the creation story in Genesis 1-2, the motif of the cosmic combat is entirely absent, utterly scourged from the narrative. There exists in these passages no independent force, against whom YHWH struggles. Genesis 1-12 is not unaware of Mesopotamian creation narratives with their cosmic combat tradition; this is clear from the many references in the Biblical flood story to the Mesopotamian flood tradition (examples are many and include the reference to kupru/koper in sealing the ark, the sending out of the birds, and the sacrifice), and the fact that Genesis 1-12 links creation and flood narratives just like the Babylonian *Atra-Hasis* sequence. It appears that Genesis 1-12 makes a conscious choice not to engage the cosmic combat motif which is at the center of the creation story in the *Atra-Hasis* and *Enuma Elish* cycles.

The Torah, it should be noted, engages with the cosmic combat narrative in the Exodus story in Exodus 1-15, in which the four elements of the cosmic combat found in both *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic Baal cycle form the structural trunk of the narrative:

1. A conflict between two powers for supremacy and control
2. The victory of one power, and the recognition of the victor’s supremacy
3. The festival celebrating the supremacy of the victor
4. The establishment of a Temple (cf Exod. 15:17) dedicated to the victor

This displacement of the cosmic combat motif from creation to the Exodus seems intentional and based in a fairly absolute monotheistic view. The cosmic combat motif of *Enuma Elish* appears nowhere in the Biblical narrative of creation, since God can have no rival in creation. It is transferred to the political sphere, in which human emperors refuse to recognize God's sovereignty, and is played out against the background of politics, rather than myth.

Conclusion

The Babylonian exile raised new theological questions for the people of Judah. Did the conquest of Jerusalem signify the eclipse of God? How was it possible to worship God, whose Temple had stood in Jerusalem, in exile? How could God allow his Temple to be destroyed? The period of the exile required Judah's prophets, both in the Land and in exile, to confront challenges to the idea of Divine Power. To do this, they interpreted God's hand as directing political events, both those that appeared detrimental to Judah and those that appeared to offer possibilities of return. They essentially denied that God had a "consistent" political position, and argued that He could act to destroy Judah, and that He could act in a somewhat hidden way to rebuild her. They consistently affirm the universal and unparalleled power of YHWH, the theology remaining constant, despite the political vicissitudes.

Bibliography

Aster, Shawn Zelig

"Ezekiel's Adaptation of Mesopotamian Melammu," *Welt des Orients* 45 (2015): 10-22

"The Exodus Narrative as an Expression of the Cosmic Combat Motif," in *A Common Cultural Heritage: Studies on Mesopotamia and the Biblical World in Honor of Barry L. Eichler*, ed. G. Frame et al (Bethesda: CDL, 2011), 97-111

Clifford, Hywel

"Deutero-Isaiah and Monotheism" in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; New York: Clark, 2010), 267-289.

Eph'al, Israel

“The western minorities in Babylonia in the 6th-5th centuries B.C.” *Orientalia* 47,1 (1978) 74-90

Faust, Avraham

Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation (Atlanta: SBL, 2012)

Kaufmann, Ezekiel

The Religion of Israel, from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile (transl. Moshe Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960)

History of the Religion of Israel from the Babylonian Exile to the End of Prophecy (transl. Clarence Efroymson; New York: Ktav, 1977)

Lipschits, Oded

“The History of the Benjamin Region under Babylonian Rule,” *Tel Aviv* 26 (1999): 155-190

Rom-Shiloni, Dalit, *Exclusive inclusivity: identity conflicts between the exiles and the people who remained (6th-5th centuries BCE)*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013

Pearce, Laurie E.

“Continuity and Normality in Sources Relating to the Judean Exile,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 2 (2014): 163-184

“Judean: A Special Status in Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Babylonia,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context* (ed. G. Knoppers, O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 267-277