

BibleWorld

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FROM BABYLON TO ETERNITY

The Exile Remembered and Constructed in Text and Tradition

Bob Becking, Alex Cannegieter, Wilfred van de Poll and Anne-Mareike Wetter

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BALANCING THE SCALES: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EXILE AS
COUNTERTRADITION IN THE BIBLE

Anne-Mareike Wetter

Introduction

Israel's faith in YHWH is founded in history. All of its great foundation narratives have their setting in this reality, in a distant, but nonetheless historical past.¹ They are populated not by deities and creatures of legend, but by "real" people, the forefathers and mothers of those who eventually defined themselves as "people of YHWH." As these foundation narratives were commemorated by successive generations, they served to legitimate certain claims (e.g., of Israel as Chosen People and lawful occupants of the Promised Land) and create an identity based on a strong sense of shared cultural memory (Assmann, 1999). However, Israel's view of history as semiotic entity also forced this Chosen People to continually re-evaluate their faith in YHWH and their own position vis-à-vis their God. After all, history never stops.

In this process of remembering and re-evaluating, the so-called Babylonian Exile is a fairly late, but nonetheless important experience. Although its direct effects on the majority of the people have long been exaggerated (see the article by Bob Becking in this book and Barstad, 1996), it led to something of an identity crisis of the "Chosen People." In time, however, the way the biblical authors appropriated and interpreted the Exile turned it into one of the basic paradigms of biblical tradition (Neusner, 1987). One may object that the Exodus, the giving of the Torah, and the Promised Land play a much more fundamental role in the experience of biblical tradition. Focusing exclusively on the genesis of the Israelites as YHWH's people, this may be true. Israel, however, was soon to realize that God's love for his chosen people certainly did not make him blind to their

shortcomings. The way in which Israel conceived herself and her God as bound by an everlasting covenant did not remain unchallenged, and the biblical writers made it very clear that without the Exile as a counterpart of the Exodus, the faith of Israel would be overly optimistic to the point of arrogance.

The tradition in the Hebrew Bible has expanded the Exile far beyond its limited historical and geopolitical aspects. In fact, it is the exilic experience of depravity, of being shaken to the core, which has spurred the formation of a specifically Israelite tradition more than any other (Carroll, 1997; Sanders, 1997). The circles responsible for shaping this tradition are almost silent when it comes to describing the historical event of the Exile (Albertz, 1998), but all the more eloquent in their interpretation of this event and its significance for Israel as a community of faith. This Israel is essentially defined by her relationship to YHWH, bound to him by a *b'rit 'olam*, an "everlasting covenant." However, how long is "everlasting"? Is there no condition under which this covenant might be declared void? The exile makes it very clear that the (covenant-)relationship between YHWH and his people is never to be taken for granted (Brueggemann, 1997). It is offered to Israel through grace, but may be forfeited at any time if this grace is rejected through disobedience. The consequence is the annihilation of Israel as a nation. It is to the merit of the prophets and other religious experts active during and after the exile that this annihilation did not signify the end but rather a transformation of Israel's relationship with her God.

There is no holiday exclusively dedicated to the remembrance of the Exile, no special rites or foods or holy places associated with it. It has entered the tradition not so much as a specific event, but as an underlying strand of consciousness that pervades all utterances about YHWH and his people. It is this abstract definition of the Exile that will be explored here: contrary to all affirmations about the grace of YHWH and his ongoing relationship with Israel, Israel itself pronounces its own existence to be optional, dependant on continuing obedience and repentance. After a more general investigation of the specific vocabulary of the exile throughout the canon, I will narrow my focus and examine several passages that weave the theme of the Exile into the tapestry of Israel's many-coloured tradition. The sequence in which the texts are discussed is based mainly on the measure in which their authors succeed in creating an emotional distance to the Exile and simultaneously embracing it as part of Israel's religious identity.

- In Lamentations 2, the shock at the devastation of Jerusalem is still tangible. It is too early to start reasoning about an explanation for the captivity. If YHWH is the driving force behind these events, then he has obviously utterly abandoned his people, and there is little point in a reflection on the relationship between him and Israel.
- In Jeremiah 4–6, the Exile is explained as the consequence of the sins of the people. It is not an unwarranted, irrational action of YHWH, but should have been anticipated as the logical reaction to the idolatry of Israel and Judah in the years preceding it.
- In Deuteronomy 4 and 28–30, exile from the Promised Land – the latter still being an unfulfilled promise at this point – is presented as the inevitable consequence if Israel fails in her faithfulness to YHWH. The Exile is developed as a counter tradition to the Covenant that must be in the back of Israel’s mind, not only after the Exile, but from the very birth of the nation (Albertz, 2001).

The Discourse of Destruction

Much of our reality is created by words. They give meaning to our experiences, and, in the case of a trauma such as the Exile, help us name the unspeakable. A word is not just a collection of phonemes, but the key to an entire world: if we understand the rules of this “language game,” we share to some extent in the experience evoked by a word. Thus, if we want to grasp something of the way the writers of the Hebrew Bible appropriated the exilic experience, we need to try and learn the rules by which they play with words.

It would go beyond the scope of this article to analyse the entire range of words used to describe the exilic experience. I will therefore limit myself to a number of verbs that are used fairly commonly and that convey something of the way in which those who reflected on the exile perceived it.² These verbs are often found within one verse, paralleling and complementing one another.³ They range from more neutral descriptions of the military reality of the day to terms that express the emotional trauma and religious connotations of the Exile.

Šābāh – The “Standard Procedure”

To begin with, there are those words that quite literally describe the process of being taken captive. The most prominent of these are *šābāh* and *gālāh* (in the Hif’il and sometimes the Qal). *Šābāh*, “to take captive,” is a fairly neutral term, and is used 42 times, often in the context of military raids. It

describes the “standard procedure” of taking prisoners of war, and is distributed fairly evenly throughout the canon, with the exception of 2 Chronicles, which alone accounts for 11 of the 42 occurrences.⁴ It is thus not explicitly linked to the Babylonian captivity, but describes an experience that belongs to warfare in general. More often than not, women and children are the object of *šābāh*. The rather dispassionate nature of the verb leaves it up to the imagination of the reader what fate they underwent, and whether this fate was preferable to a quick death on the battlefield. In several cases (e.g., Num. 31:9; Deut. 21:10), Israel is not the victim but the perpetrator of *šābāh*. Interestingly, none of the texts that will be discussed in this paper use this term when referring to the Babylonian Exile. Apparently, they are interested in the more abstract connotations of this event.

Gālāh – The Removal (Because) of Sins

As opposed to the very common use of *šābāh*, *gālāh* occurs only in contexts that are linked to the captivity in Babylon. In the Hif’il, and sometimes the Qal as well, it is usually translated as “carry away into exile” or “go into exile.” However, the more standard meaning of the Qal and the Pi’el is “to uncover, to reveal, to remove.” In this sense, the word may indicate an act of revelation from YHWH, but more commonly it has the connotation of shame, of uncovering what is not meant to be seen. Lamentations 4:22 shows that the double meaning may well have lingered in the back of the minds of those who used *gala* to describe the exilic experience:

Your iniquity is fulfilled, daughter of Sion.
He shall not carry you into exile (*gālāh* Hif’il) again,
He shall visit your iniquity, daughter of Edom,
He shall uncover (*gālāh* Pi’el) your sins.⁵

The connotation of shame is thereby added to the more neutral sense of “taking captive.” It is not difficult to imagine that the exiles were indeed humiliated by their captors – sadly, rape, slander, and unnecessary cruelty are all fairly normal behaviour in soldiers who have just won a great victory. However, the fact that *gālāh* is often used in the context of divine law⁶ suggests that it was not only “natural” shame that plagued the captives, but a sense of guilt, of sinfulness that could no longer be hidden.

In Lamentations 2:14, which will be discussed below, the author reproaches the prophets for their failure to uncover (*gālāh*, Pi’el) the people’s sins: in fact, he asserts that their negligence is partly to blame for the ensuing captivity.

Pûš – There Is No Such Thing as Security

A third verb that is often used to describe the experience of exile is *pûš*, “to scatter, disperse.”⁷ Interestingly, almost the first occurrence of this word in the canon is in Genesis 11:4, where it is said that the people decided to build a tower “lest we be scattered upon the face of all the earth” (see Uehlinger, 1990: 572ff). It seems to be the natural inclination of human beings to huddle together – after all, “how can one keep warm alone?”⁸ The Exile makes an end to this illusion of security: like dead leaves are swept up by the wind, the Israelites are scattered among the nations.⁹ One of the verses where this verb is employed is Deuteronomy 28:64, also to be discussed further on. Here, it is in stark contrast with the unity and shared identity of the people which are emphasized in the rest of this book.

The sheep-like behaviour of seeking safety by thronging together is enhanced by another metaphor often used by Jeremiah in combination with the verb *pûš*. He especially chastises the irresponsible shepherds for letting the sheep get scattered.¹⁰ In many other cases, however, YHWH himself is the subject of *pûš*, the one who scatters.¹¹

If this was not already the case with *gālāh*, *pûš* certainly interprets the Exile as a religious rather than a political event. It is the punishment of YHWH, which puts an end to the arrogant belief that the people and the city of God were immune to any threat from the outside.

Zārāh – As Ashes in the Wind

A relatively similar word is *zārāh*, “to scatter, fan, winnow.” In some cases it is used to describe a cultic action, as in Exodus 32:20, where Moses scatters the ashes of the golden calf in water. In most cases, however, it is used of Israel, which has become as unrecognizable and utterly helpless as ashes in the wind. In many cases, either the wind or a fan is the subject of this verb: a faceless, irrational force, sweeping away everything that crosses its path. Behind these forces of nature, however, stands YHWH, the great Avenger, ready to execute a judgment that seems irreversible: after all, how can ashes scattered in the wind ever be reunited and recover their original shape?¹²

Nātaš – Torn from the Land

The last verb to be discussed here is *nātaš*, “to uproot.” It is a favourite expression of Jeremiah, who accounts for 10 of the 19 occurrences within the Hebrew Bible. In an agricultural society, this metaphor would have been well understood by all listeners: a plant, uprooted from the soil, its roots unable to nourish it, would wither away before long. According to

the writers using this expression, Israel met the same fate: uprooted from the Promised Land, she was implanted into the scorched Babylonian soil – perhaps not a fatal procedure, but at least for a while it would be anything but “a tree planted by streams of waters.”¹³

Short as this overview may be, it allows the reader to conclude that the writers who described the impact of the Exile used verbs that convey a sense of absolute terror, of a fate that cannot be escaped: Israel is no more. She is scattered, blown into all winds, uprooted. However, in shaping the tradition of the Exile, they did not limit themselves to this descriptive level. Their choice of words hints at an interpretation of the Exile as a predominantly religious event: the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of part of Israel’s population is no coincidence. YHWH’s people have experienced his righteous wrath for their sins.

One may wonder, however, whether this interpretation was in fact the instant reaction of the exiles, and whether it was the final one, as well. Did the exiles immediately attribute their fate to an act of God? And if so, whom did they blame – YHWH, or themselves and their inability to keep the divine law? Can we find traces of a development of this tradition that slowly but surely became the *communis opinio* of the remnant of Israel? I suggest that the biblical material does indeed hint at a development of this kind. Gradually, the indignation about the annihilation of God’s city and his people made room for a more nuanced version of the faith in YHWH. The need for repentance and the affirmation that Israel as YHWH’s people was essentially optional – principles that the prophets had been preaching for centuries – were confirmed and integrated as an essential part of the biblical tradition. We will see that the choice of words of an author betrays something of his interpretation of the Exile. Is he so stunned by the experience that no words seem strong enough to capture its impact on the author and his community? Or does he accept it as cruel, but necessary punishment, and does he therefore put more emphasis on the “why,” instead of the “how” of the Exile? And last but not least, how does he view the relationship between YHWH and his people *after* the Exile?

From Trauma to Tradition

Excursus: Dating Traditions – Intertextuality within the Bible

The biblical texts that mirror Israel’s reaction to the Babylonian Exile show different responses to this experience, ranging from abject horror to a much

more detached, nuanced reflection. The presentation of the different responses in this article suggests that the manner in which the Israelites interpreted the Babylonian Exile is subject to a development over time. Like an individual confronted with the sudden death of a loved one or some other personal trauma, Israel seems to be overcome with shock and denial at first (Lamentations), then has to go through a period of mourning before it can point the finger at its own contributions to this catastrophe (Jeremiah), and finally manages to accept the Exile as necessary part of its tradition (Deuteronomy). However, any claim about a chronological development of this biblical tradition rests on relatively shaky legs. We can never state with any certainty that the different attitudes towards the Exile present in the texts echo successive stages of Israel's *Geistesgeschichte*. The differences may also be explained by the fact that we are dealing with very divergent genres, all with their own *Sitz im Leben*, functioning alongside each other in different circumstances and perhaps with different audiences.

There is another question that begs an answer. One of the declared aims of this article is to study and describe the way in which biblical traditions, such as Covenant, Exodus, and various narrative motifs, have been reinterpreted in order to come to terms with the exilic experience. Of course, this may lead to a “cat-chasing-the-tail” discussion of what came first. Was there an early prototype of the biblical traditions, which was then taken up and reinterpreted during or after the Exile? Or were some of the themes – for example, the Exodus motif – only developed vis-à-vis the exile, in order to offer hope in an apparently hopeless situation? After all, both concepts forming the theoretical foundation of this study – intertextuality and the appropriation of traditions – assume that an existing text is reread by a different audience and under different circumstances, and thereby acquires new meaning (Pfister and Broich, 1985).

However, to date individual biblical texts or traditions is not the point of this study. Although the Exile certainly caused some of the creeds of Israel to be seen in a new light, it seems unlikely that they were a wholly new invention of the writers active during this period. To name just one small example: in several instances, Israel's conduct and the corresponding punishment of YHWH is compared to the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁴ Without the narrative in Genesis 18–19, this image would be incomprehensible. It seems likely that the same principle applies to concepts such as the Exodus, the covenant relationship with YHWH, and the Promised Land. Of course, the original meaning of all of these motifs may have been altered as they were reused by the exilic authors, but it seems safe to assume that the Babylonian Exile caused Israel to reconsider and rephrase the basic assumptions of her faith rather than to invent them in the first place.

Facing the Void: Lamentations 2

Few texts in the Hebrew Bible express the devastation at the destruction of Jerusalem in as heartbreaking a fashion as Lamentations. Most scholars agree that these songs of lament reflect the experiences of eyewitnesses of the fall of Jerusalem (Hillers, 1964; Rudolph, 1939; Westermann, 1990). They were used to commemorate this event by that part of the population that was left in Jerusalem, and possibly by the captives in Babylon, as well (Albertz, 2001). Some scholars view them as the work of one author. They approach them as a single literary unit and claim that Lamentations 3 forms the interpretative centre of the book (see, e.g., Hillers, 1964), but the differences in vocabulary, speaker, and outlook between the five poems seem to suggest otherwise. An interpretation of Lamentations 1, 2, 4, and 5 that departs from the hope that is expressed in Lamentations 3 may be justified within a canonical approach. However, a major drawback of this method is the fact that it hardly appreciates the unchecked destitution present in the rest of the book. Therefore, in the following, Lamentations will be viewed as a collection of different poems which can and must be interpreted individually before anything may be said about their possible interrelation.

At the centre of our investigation stands Lamentations 2. Here, the reader can still sense the undiminished shock of the author. Although the poem is carefully structured in acrostic fashion, this does by no means suggest that it is a detached meditation on events of a distant past. The blood and tears of the victims still seem to seep through every line, and the all-pervading mood is one of bitterness and lasting anguish. Verbs describing a process of destruction are contained in almost every verse. A verb that is used as often as five times to describe the actions of YHWH towards his people is *bāla*, “to swallow up” or “devour” (vv. 2, 5, 8, and 16). Other prominent verbs are *šāpak* (“to pour out”), *šāḥat* (“to destroy, corrupt”), and *hārag* (“to slay”).

The perpetrator of the “crimes against humanity” that are described in every verse is YHWH. He is portrayed as a demon of wrath, as an enemy and foe of his people. While countless psalms and other texts of the Hebrew Bible affirm him as the one who delivers from enemies, here he has taken on the role of adversary himself.¹⁵ His anger and lust for revenge seem unquenchable. Readers get an impression of the totality of the destruction as the author draws their attention to various parts of the city of Jerusalem and of the population. As he paints a mental image of the defeated city, the author directs the reader's eyes to the strongholds of Judah (vv. 2, 5), to the tabernacle (vv. 4, 6) and its different components (i.e., the altar and the

sanctuary), the palace walls and the city walls (vv. 6 and 7), and the gates of the city (v. 9). Every single group of the population – elders, young women (v. 10), children and infants (v. 11), young men and maidens (v. 21) is hit by YHWH's lust for murder. Even those who deemed themselves perfectly safe, the king and the priest (v. 6), are rejected. Neither the city of Jerusalem nor the Temple of YHWH are spared: it seems as though God is determined to put an end to the relationship between himself and his people. At the very least, this relationship is questioned, and the false security that the overly optimistic prophets had advocated is exposed.

While the first part of the poem deals with the destruction itself and YHWH's role in bringing it about, verses 18-22 describe the reaction of the poet and the people. They cry out to the Lord for help, but no help comes. Yet the author urges his listeners to appeal to YHWH, if not to soften his heart, then at least to make the consequences of his wrath very clear to him. In verse 20, the author himself confronts YHWH with his acts of violence:

“Look, O LORD, and consider:
Whom have you ever treated like this?
Should women eat their offspring,
The children they have cared for?
Should priest and prophet be killed
In the sanctuary of the Lord?”

There is a definite note of defiance in this and the following verses: how can YHWH combine his mercy and righteousness with these acts of unrestrained violence? How have the people deserved such a treatment? And why does this gruesome fate meet even the weakest and allegedly most innocent: women, children, priests and prophets?

There is no sense of guilt on the part of the writer or the people. They are confounded by the sudden change in the character of their God. He seems to suffer from multiple personality disorder: normally a shelter for Israel, he now reveals an almost sadistic side of himself. In fact, God's earlier acts of deliverance, such as the Exodus, seem to be wiped from the memory of the writer: the current situation is too devastating to meditate on a less dire past. He does confirm that YHWH has once dwelled with his people (vv. 1, 3, 6-7), but there is no hope of a return to that state. All that is left to do is to bewail Jerusalem's irreversible fate.

What is the significance of such a poem of pure lament and complaint within a canon that generally confesses the mercy and goodness of YHWH? As already mentioned, several scholars have argued that this significance does not exist apart from a confession of sins and a cry for mercy to YHWH

(see, e.g., Rudolph, 1939). They read Lamentations 1, 2, 4, and 5 in the light of Lamentations 3, especially verses 21ff., where a much more positive attitude towards YHWH is presented:

“It is because of the mercies of YHWH that we are not consumed,
because his compassions do not wear out.”¹⁶

Here, punishment is directly related to sin, and the people are asked to return to YHWH:

“Why should any living man complain
when punished for his sins?
Let us examine our ways and test them,
and let us return to the LORD” (Lam. 3:39-40).

The purpose of Lamentations, according to such an holistic interpretation, is first of all to explain what happened, and second of all to offer some outlook for the future: if Israel confesses her sins, YHWH will restore his relationship with his people and rescue her from her enemies.¹⁷ Westermann, however, declines this approach. According to him, there is no secondary theological rationale behind Lamentations 1, 2, 4, and 5 except, literally, to lament the tremendous losses, and to let future generations participate in this experience (Westermann, 1990). He points to the similarities between these poems and the death laments of Ancient Israel. Just like a death lament has a chiefly psychological function, namely to help express one's grief at the death of a loved one, Lamentations may be seen as expression of Israel's grief at the destruction of Jerusalem. Lamentations 2 certainly does not give the impression that it wants to justify or change what happened, neither is it able to look beyond the immediate crisis. If anyone is asked to repent, it is YHWH. The author attributes the fall of Jerusalem to schemes the deity had devised in ancient times (v. 17), which the people probably could not have averted even if they had tried. The only human culprits mentioned in this chapter are the false prophets (v. 14), who had lulled the people of Israel into believing that they remained on the good side of YHWH. The people themselves are not held accountable for what has happened: they are pictured as innocent victims of an irrational, violent God.

The unbridled emotions that characterize this poem, and the almost total lack of a self-conscious reflection on the possible causes of the Exile may indicate that Lamentations 2 represents a very early stage in Israel's appropriation of the captivity. The wounds are still too raw for soothing words. Questions about the “why” and “wherefore” may be asked and

answered later, but for now, all that is left is brokenness. It will be up to others to pick up the pieces and remodel them into a new relationship of YHWH with his people.

Picking Up the Pieces: Jeremiah 4:5–6:30

Jeremiah was one of those who were able to leave behind their initial shock at the destruction of Jerusalem and make it part of their belief system. Tradition views Jeremiah as the prophet of the Exile par excellence. His warnings to the nation and his words of comfort after catastrophe had struck helped shape the Exile as an essentially religious experience.

Jeremiah had been called to his prophetic office in 626 BCE, a few years before the “finding of the Law” under Josiah.¹⁸ The religious reform that followed left a distinct imprint on his preaching. As may be expected, his words show great affinity with the thoughts of the Deuteronomistic school, which also developed around this time; just like this theological school, he emphasized notions such as covenant loyalty and the warning not to be too confident about the invincibility of Jerusalem. After having witnessed how the reform of Josiah was undone under the kings that followed, he regularly warns the people, especially the religious and political leaders, that catastrophe is underway if they do not return to YHWH.

But religious upheaval was not the only difficulty the nation¹⁹ was facing in Jeremiah’s age. The political situation was precarious as well: wedged in between the competing powers of Egypt and Babylon, it had to choose its allegiance very carefully if it was to survive this struggle for hegemony that was being fought in its backyard. When two overly confident kings of Judah rose up against Babylon, retribution was swift: in 598 BCE, under Jehoiakim, Jerusalem was besieged and conquered for the first time and part of the population taken into captivity. Twelve years later, under Zedekiah, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed and an even larger part of the population led away. This event in the year 587 BCE is traditionally viewed as beginning of the Babylonian captivity and the dissolution of the people of Judah, although it was, in fact, only one of a sequence of events that led to the end of Judah as an independent nation.

Jeremiah was active before and during the captivity, always urging the people to repent and warning the political elite not to rise up against Babylon. In fact, he introduces Babylon as instrument in the hand of YHWH: rebellion against Babylon is equated with rebellion against God himself, and the rebels will have to face the death sentence.²⁰

An especially vivid prophecy is delivered in Jeremiah 4:5–6:30. Until now the coming destruction had been presented as a very real threat, but

nonetheless as one that may be averted if Israel but “circumcises her hearts” (Jer. 4:4). One of the verbs used repeatedly in the preceding chapter is *šuv*, “to return.” Again and again, YHWH asks Israel to return to him, promising that if she does so, “I will heal your backsliding” (Jer. 3:22). Every opportunity is offered to the people to save themselves from YHWH’s wrath at their idolatry and political opportunism. Now, in Jeremiah 4:5, the cataclysm is set in motion, and no act of repentance from Israel will be able to put a stop to it. These two elements – the coming destruction and its motivation in terms of the guilt of the people – pervade the entire text. Their combination comes across as a struggling attempt to hold on to the faith in a righteous God, even in the face of disaster.

It is difficult to date or subdivide the text, which consists of a variety of short poems and prose texts bound together by their common theme: the coming destruction (Bright, 1964: 33). The themes of destruction and repentance were certainly part of Jeremiah’s preaching prior to 587 BCE, and parts of Jeremiah 4–6 probably date to a time before the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar (Bright, 1964). However, for our purpose, the text as a whole²¹ will be read as an attempt to create a theodicy that tries to make sense of the tragic events *after* they had taken place, and of the role of YHWH as their executor (Carroll, 1986: 115–18). The text itself suggests that this is how it wants to be read:

And when the people ask, “Why has the LORD our God done all this to us?,” you will tell them, “As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your own land, so now you will serve foreigners in a land not your own” (5:19).

Throughout the text, details of the coming destruction are alternated with accusations against Israel and Judah. The speakers and audience vary: sometimes YHWH speaks to or through Jeremiah; at other times, he addresses his people directly. The transitions between these two levels of speech are fluent. The prophet’s speech has three functions: he delivers YHWH’s message to the people, he reflects upon this message (e.g., 4:23–26), and occasionally, he even talks back to YHWH, expressing his frustration about the seemingly disproportionate punishment (4:10).

The text starts with a message from YHWH that Jeremiah must deliver to the people of Judah and Jerusalem, announcing the imminent “disaster from the north” (v. 6) that is about to strike the nation (vv. 5–9). In verse 10, Jeremiah comments on the content of this message:

“Ah, Sovereign LORD, how completely you have deceived this people and Jerusalem by saying, ‘You will have peace; when the sword is at our throats.’”

Apparently, the announced judgment is hard to combine with his ideas about and prior experiences of YHWH. It will take most of chapters 4 through 6 to convince him that the harsh punishment is justified and must be seen as logical reaction of a just and jealous God. A verse that sums up the essence of this rationale is 4:18:

“Your own conduct and actions
have brought this upon you.
This is your punishment.
How bitter it is!
How it pierces to the heart!”

The adversary that will bring about the destruction is only identified as coming “from the north” or “from a distant land.”²² Babylon is not mentioned explicitly, but certainly after the events of 587 BCE, the text was interpreted as referring to this specific nation. Jeremiah regularly uses imagery from nature to portray the fate that will strike Judah: a lion will attack them (Jeremiah 4:7), a “scorching wind” will come upon them (4:11), and their enemy will “advance like the clouds” (4:13). Unlike in the case of, for example, Sodom and Gomorrah, the enemy is unmistakably a human agent, not the blind forces of nature.²³ This makes it all the more bitter for the victims: YHWH uses a foreign, idolatrous, and cruel nation to punish his own people. In Jeremiah 4:19-21, the prophet responds to the vision of destruction with words that sound very much like Lamentations. His reaction is unrestricted panic: not even the feeblest attempt to avert the approaching evil is made. All he can do is to wonder how long the current catastrophe will last. In verse 22, YHWH again motivates the punishment with the foolishness and sinfulness of his people.

In the next few verses, Jeremiah 4:23-26, the prophet describes his vision in terms of a complete reversal of creation:

“I looked at the earth, and behold!, it was empty and void,
and to the heavens, and there was no light.
I looked at the mountains, and behold!, they were trembling,
And to all the hills, and they were shaking.
I looked, and there was no human being,
And all the birds of the skies had fled.
I looked, and behold!, the fertile field was a waste,
And every city was broken down before YHWH,
And before the fury of his anger.”

The similarities between Jeremiah 4:23-26 and Genesis 1 are striking; they do not only share common themes, but often use the same vocabulary:

“earth,” “empty and void,” “heavens,” “light,” “Adam,” “birds,” and the omnipresent “behold” (*“hinnēh”*). In Genesis, it is God who looks at his creations and concludes that “it is good.” Now, it is the prophet who looks at his surroundings and concludes that the world has been turned upside down. Everything that God had created – order, light, stability, flora and fauna, and last but not least, humankind – has disappeared. Chaos reigns again, every form of culture has been undone, and even the light has left the skies. The fact that the prophet uses the image of a reversal of creation to describe the Exile demonstrates the magnitude he ascribes to the event. For him, the fall of Jerusalem heralds the end of the world as he and his fellow citizens know it. The image also implies that just like creation, the current destruction is a work of YHWH. We might speak of appropriation on two levels: on the one hand, a traditional theme of Israel’s faith – the creation myth – is “recycled” as an image for the Exile and thereby given new meaning. On the other hand, the historical event of the Exile is interpreted and put into the context of Israel’s faith with the help of concepts that were presumably quite familiar to Jeremiah’s audience. The familiarity of these themes helped them to come to terms with something that might otherwise have left them completely stunned.

The same mechanism is at work in a slightly more subtle way at the beginning of chapter 5. It starts with a scene that is reminiscent of the biblical narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah, although the names of these places are not mentioned explicitly.²⁴ YHWH asks the prophet to search Jerusalem for one righteous person – in vain, as becomes apparent in the next few verses. Like Abraham, who had been pleading for the population of the two cities, Jeremiah has to admit that righteousness is nowhere to be found: from the poorest beggar to the leaders of the city, the people have refused to take any of the previous warnings to heart (5:3). The appropriation of the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah makes the accusations against Judah all the more piercing: apparently, the people of YHWH are no better than the alien cities that had become a symbol of moral pandemonium. The next verses alternate between summing up Judah’s sins and describing the consequences of these sins. The catalogue of Judah’s aberrations is extensive: “wicked thoughts” (4:14), rebellion (4:17), inability to do good (4:22), prostitution (4:30), idolatry (5:7-8), false prophecies (5:12; 6:14), social injustice and corruption (5:26-28; 6:13, 28), religious irreverence and negligence (5:31; 6:10, 16-17, 19). Most of these accusations may be summarized as “disobeying the Law” (6:19) – every aspect of the Law, the cultic as well as the social. And there is another facet, hinted at in Jeremiah 4:30: here, Judah is described as a loose woman soliciting the favours of her

lovers. However, this image should probably not be associated with prostitution as such, but with the political games played by the last kings of Judah, who were bargaining for military support left and right.

Parts of the text are presented in the form of a lawsuit, with YHWH in the role of accuser and the earth or the nations in the role of witnesses for the prosecutor.²⁵ If it is at all possible to conflate the message of the various short pieces of text, one might sum them up as follows: “the punishment brought about by YHWH is horrific, but nonetheless in proportion with Israel’s sins.” Certainly if one considers the text that precedes our passage, where YHWH repeatedly but unsuccessfully beckons his people to return to him, the reader must conclude that God is within his right to chastise them severely.

From political and personal disaster the Exile is turned into a religious experience. Nebuchadnezzar does not have his military genius to thank for his victories: it is YHWH who pulls the strings behind the scenes, and who makes use of Babylon to teach his people a lesson.

If we compare this text from Jeremiah with Lamentations, there are not many differences on the descriptive level: both portray the chaos that has struck the nation in very vivid language. While Lamentation leaves it at this description, Jeremiah goes one step further and interprets the Exile as the more or less logical consequence of Judah’s past behaviour. This difference between a purely descriptive and an interpretative text is shown, among other things, by such small details as the causal conjunction *kî*, “because,” which is used more than 30 times in Jeremiah 4:5-6, 30, and only once in Lamentations 2.

Lamentations had already confirmed YHWH’s role, but had not yet drawn the conclusion that it is the sinfulness of the people that is ultimately responsible for it. Jeremiah makes it very clear that the captivity is not due to an inexplicable divine mood swing, but to the inescapable consequence of Israel’s and Judah’s persistence in ignoring their God. It enters the tradition as yet another chapter in the history of YHWH with his people.

But there is another difference between Lamentations and Jeremiah: The ability of the latter to look beyond the current catastrophe and believe in the possibility of a (partial) restoration. In Lamentations 2:22, the annihilation seems complete:

“In the day of the LORD’s anger
no one escaped or survived;
those I have born and raised,
my enemy has finished off.”

The last word of this chapter, *kālah* (“to complete, finish, exterminate”), puts extra emphasis on the finality of YHWH’s wrath.

In Jeremiah, on the other hand, YHWH confirms several times that he will not destroy the nation completely (4:27; 5:10, 18). The combination between severe punishment and possible restoration is illustrated by the image of the vineyard (5:10): Jeremiah receives the task of ravaging the vineyards of Israel, but is asked only to strip off the branches, not to tear out the plants entirely. Just like a vine can recover from being pruned back, the nation may, in the future, grow new branches, even though Israel as she is now “does not belong to YHWH.”

The last text that will be studied here, Deuteronomy, takes the appropriation of the Exile yet one step further: the possibility of captivity becomes the perpetual counter-tradition of the people of Israel.

Reinterpreting History: Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and 28:15–30:20

In Deuteronomy, we witness Moses addressing Israel for the last time before his death and before the people cross the river Jordan to enter the Promised Land. He repeats the laws that had been given to Israel at Horeb and puts before them two choices: blessing or curse. The blessings for obedience to YHWH are predictable enough: prosperity, progeny, and military triumphs (e.g., Deut. 28:1-14). It is the curses for disobedience, however, that make this speech so extraordinary: besides poverty, disease, military disasters, and general malaise, there is the very specific threat of exile:

“The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers... You will have sons and daughters, but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity” (Deut. 28:36, 41).

In the chronological self-understanding of Israel, roughly a millennium separates this speech of Moses from the historical event of the Babylonian Exile. How has the theme of captivity wound its way into the words of its Founding Father? How is it described, and how does it function in this context?

According to Martin Noth, the book of Deuteronomy is part of the great Deuteronomistic History, which spans the books from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings, or in other words, the events from Israel entering the Promised Land until the Babylonian Exile. The author of this history of Israel regularly reflects on the events he reports in the form of a sermon delivered by great political and spiritual leaders. In line with Noth’s theory, we may view Moses’ speeches in Deuteronomy 4 and 28–30 as attempts, “rückblickend und vorwärtsschauend den Gang der Dinge zu deuten...und die

praktischen Konsequenzen für das Handeln der Menschen daraus zu ziehen" (Noth, 1943). How, then, is the history of Israel with her God interpreted in these speeches, and what are the consequences for the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of her faith? How does the experience of the Exile cast new light on her basic creeds?

In order to answer these questions, we must first focus on the content of these basic creeds. Although it may be impossible to discover exactly when these creeds came to play a role and to what extent they were shared by the majority of the people, it seems safe to assume that notions of an Exodus from Egypt, of a covenant binding Israel together as a people and to YHWH, and of the Land of Canaan as given to the people as their inheritance were affirmed by Israel long before the Exile. They are certainly part of the Deuteronomist's belief system, and are summarized by him in Deuteronomy 4:32-40:

"Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today... Keep his decrees and commands...so that...you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time" (Deut. 4:37-38, 40).

All of the above – the freedom attained through the Exodus from Egypt, the covenant relationship, and especially the Promised Land – were challenged when Jerusalem fell and part of the population was led into exile. In Moses' speech in Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomist successively creates, deconstructs, and reconstructs these basic elements of Israel's faith. His main concern throughout the book is the relationship between Covenant and Promised Land (Weinfeld, 1991). In the following section, we will first focus on the way in which the threat of the Exile is worked out in each text. In a second step, the effects of this threat on the belief system of Israel will be discussed.

Concerning the way the Exile is depicted, there are great differences between Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and Deuteronomy 28:15–30:20. Deuteronomy 1–4 may be viewed as introduction to the Law that is then stipulated in chapters 5–27. Moses commemorates some of the highlights of the Exodus and the desert wanderings, and at the same time ventures a look into the future. His musings and predictions are not limited to the immediate future, when Israel will conquer the Promised Land. They extend to a time when

"you (Israel) have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time" (4:25).

In those days, he warns his audience, their idolatry will have dire consequences.

In chapter 4:25-31, the description of the Exile is rather matter-of-fact: "if you do such and such, then you will quickly perish from the land... you will certainly be destroyed...and the LORD will scatter (*pûš*, see above) you among the peoples" (vv. 26-27). In the preceding chapters, Moses had emphasized the unity and greatness of Israel as a newborn people and the military victories that had paved her way into the Promised Land. Now, with just a few words, he predicts a complete reversal of this pleasant situation if Israel so much as puts one toe out of line. Without elaborating and without any all too bloody images, this short pericope puts everything that had been promised previously into perspective. Yes, YHWH has chosen Israel to be his people, and yes, they are underway to the "land of milk and honey," but like the builders of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11), they may be scattered over the face of the earth and cease to exist as a distinct entity if they worship any God besides YHWH. Surprisingly, one of the consequences of the Exile is simultaneously the reason why Israel will have to be punished in the first place: idolatry. In the countries where YHWH will scatter the Israelites, they will have no choice but to worship the deities of their oppressors. And after Moses' eulogy of the liberating acts of YHWH, it is not only ungrateful of the people to follow other gods, but might turn out a punishment in itself. After all, "man-made Gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or smell" (4:28) are of no great help to a people in exile, especially compared to YHWH, who not only hears but speaks directly to his people (4:11-14).

Looking at Deut. 28:15–30:20, one cannot help but notice that the description of, as well as the motivation for the Exile differ from the ones given in chapter 4. Of course, the context is different, as well. The preceding chapters consist of a repetition of the Law that had been given to the people at Mount Horeb. Now Moses asks the people to pledge their obedience to this Law and be blessed – or refuse, and be cursed. In chapter 4, the only reason for a possible future exile was idolatry. Now, there is a whole catalogue of laws that must be obeyed in order to avoid captivity. Besides, exile is only one of a number of curses that will hit the people if they fail to live according to these laws. Some of these curses – sickness, poverty, and military disasters – are rather predictable, although the morbid details with which they are described are somewhat shocking. In Deuteronomy 28:30-68, the threats the author puts into the mouth of

Moses become more specific: disobedience will lead to war, siege, and ultimately, exile. The description of these events is so detailed and gory that they come across as the account of an eyewitness of Judah's struggle against Babylon, the siege and downfall of Jerusalem, and ultimately the Exile. In fact, on the descriptive levels, there are many concurrences between Deuteronomy 28 and Lamentations. To name just a few examples: according to both texts, Judah and Jerusalem will be ridiculed in the eyes of the world (Deut. 28:25, 37; Lam. 2:15-16). Both speak of the leaders of the people who are being led away into captivity (Deut. 28:36; Lam. 2:2, 9), and in both texts, the weakest members of the population – women, children and the elderly – bear the heaviest burden (Deut. 28:53-57; Lam. 2:10-11, 21). They share even the most gruesome details, of mothers and fathers eating their infant children when faced with the threat of starvation. On a more interpretative level, however, there is one image of the captivity that is unique to Deuteronomy: here, the future Exile is likened to the past period of servitude in Egypt (Deut. 28:27, 60, 68). This happens in two ways: on the one hand, the text speaks of sending the Israelites back to Egypt as slaves which no one will buy (v. 68). The punishment, however, does not stop here: Israel, the chosen people, will experience the same plagues that had struck Egypt before the Exodus. The chosen people will fare no better than their despised former masters. Again, a familiar theme – the Egyptian plagues – is used to illuminate a new experience. This image not only emphasizes the severity of the Exile, but also the fact that it is the consequence of a direct involvement of YHWH in history, this time not to free Israel, but to discipline her.

How can all this be brought in line with Israel's confession of YHWH as the God who has chosen her, liberated her, and promised her a land of her own? In other words, how does the Exile, presented by Moses as a curse that is sure to come to pass, alter Israel's self-image and beliefs?

Perhaps the most concrete and tangible loss was that of the land. After all, it is the land that is primarily forfeited when a people is led into exile. Naturally, those exiled must have wondered how dependable YHWH's promise of the land really was. Weinfeld argues that "the gift of the land to Israel, according to the old sources, is a perpetual, unconditional gift (Gen 13,15; 17,8; 48,4)" (Weinfeld, 1991). He differentiates between two types of treaties that were common in the *Umwelt* of Ancient Israel: "royal grants," which promise certain rewards to loyal subjects, and "vassal treaties," which bind a people to their sovereign on pain of severe punishment. The former were given unconditionally, based on past services rather than on obedience in the future, while the latter were contingent upon the conduct of the

inferior party. Originally, Weinfeld maintains, the Promise of the Land was perceived as a grant, a gift that could not be revoked by any action of the people. However, the experience of the Exile proved otherwise. Obviously, there were certain circumstances under which Israel could lose her inheritance. The Deuteronomistic History, and especially the speeches by Moses and others may be viewed as attempts to make some sense of this loss.

The original promise to Abraham had been:

"The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God" (Gen. 13:15).

Now that exile had become a reality, must Israel conclude that God is unfaithful, that he does not keep his promises?

The Deuteronomist suggests nothing of the kind. Instead, he reinterprets – or appropriates – the ancient promise in terms of a treaty instead of a grant, and connects it with the concept of the Covenant (Weinfeld, 1991). A typical feature of a covenant is that it may be broken by the inferior party – and if it is, disaster ensues.

Of course, Israel's covenant relationship with YHWH may be interpreted more broadly than just the promise of land. In its most basic form, it may be expressed with the formula "I will be their God," which is also contained within the promise to Abraham. The analysis of Lamentations 2 has shown that after the fall of Jerusalem and the ensuing deportation, Israel seriously doubted whether it was still possible to speak of a relationship with YHWH at all. If this relationship consisted only of the guarantee of unconditional possession of the Promised Land as given to Abraham, this fundamental doubt was certainly justified. However, the Deuteronomist emphasizes that this is not the case. In fact, he asserts that the Covenant of Israel with YHWH is not simply a continuation of the promise to Abraham, but an entirely new way in which YHWH relates to his people, based primarily upon obedience to the Law (Deut. 5:3).

The Exile interpreted in this manner is not the result of a divine "mood swing," but the natural consequence of Israel's misbehaviour. Interestingly, although biblical scholars today see this kind of reasoning as a reaction to the Exile, it is not presented as such by the biblical material. On the contrary, it is placed in the mouth of Moses before Israel even enters the Promised Land. This counter-tradition is meant to correct the overly enthusiastic belief that once given, the land could never be lost. Israel should have known better than to turn to other gods. After all, the people have been

warned – according to Deuteronomistic tradition, from the very outset – of the disastrous consequences of their idolatry.

The Moses of Deuteronomy is positive that eventually Israel will abandon the Covenant and consequently be banished from the Promised Land, but he is equally certain that this is not the last word spoken in the matter. Both in Deuteronomy 4:29-31 and 30:1-10, there is the promise of return from the Exile that has just been announced:

“The LORD will bring you back from captivity and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you” (Deut. 30:3).

This return will be brought about by a renewed devotion of the people to YHWH and characterized by an even more intimate relationship. Although the author does not go as far as Jeremiah, who speaks of a “new Covenant” (Jer. 31:31), he uses similar images: YHWH will circumcise the Israelites’ hearts (Deut. 30:6), and they will love him in return. In the end, the catastrophic event of the Exile will lead Israel to a less presumptuous, but all the more genuine faith in YHWH.

Conclusions

Although by necessity selective and incomplete, the above analysis demonstrates that the writers of the Hebrew Bible used the experience of exile and depravation as the building blocks of a new strand of tradition. From now on, Israel confessed its own identity to be determined by the Exile in a way that the actual historical event hardly seems to justify. As Neusner puts it: “Although only a part of Israel in fact had undergone those experiences, the Judaic system of the Torah made normative that experience of alienation and reconciliation” (Neusner, 1987: 34).

One thing is affirmed by Israel from the outset: the Exile transcends the personal and political sphere; it is an essentially religious experience. As such, it must be integrated into the canon of Israel’s faith. Although one can never be too careful about dating biblical texts, I cautiously suggest that there is a development in the creation of the exilic tradition. In Lamentations 2, it is described as a completely incomprehensible act of wrath by YHWH. In a way, this text refuses to appropriate the Exile. The writer does not, in any case, make an effort to reconcile it with his worldview. He acknowledges it as a complete reversal of everything he held to be true about his God, but does not go in search of a reason or a possibility to adjust his belief system to the new situation. Jeremiah, although probably written

not much later than Lamentations, manages to interpret the Exile as in line with the affirmation that YHWH is, and will remain, Israel’s God. It is construed as a direct consequence of the people’s behaviour; not YHWH, but Israel is to be blamed for its dire situation. Finally, in Deuteronomy, the exilic experience enters the basic confession of Israel about itself and its relationship with YHWH. From now on, a note of caution swings in every declaration of the goodness of YHWH: his inclination towards Israel is not limitless and, however great, his love may be exhausted. As Brueggeman puts it, “Israel’s counter testimony has its natural habitat in exile” (Brueggemann, 1997: 437). Israel’s only guarantee of survival in a hostile world is the promise of YHWH. In the Exile, this promise has revealed itself to be conditional. In this light, the whole of the tradition has to be reinterpreted and reformulated, in order to acknowledge both sides of the Janus face of YHWH.

Notes

1. This differentiation between Israel’s foundation myths and those of other cultures says nothing about the historical truth contained in either. It simply states the fact that Israel itself interpreted these myths as part of history, instead of events that took place before all human memory began, in a different dimension, as it were.
2. For a more comprehensive study, see Jörn Kiefer’s work on interpretations of the Exile in biblical and post-biblical literature (Kiefer, 2005).
3. See, e.g., 1 Kgs 14:15; Ezek. 12:15, 20:23, 22:15; Isa. 41:16.
4. Examples are Gen. 14:14; 1 Sam. 30:3; 2 Kgs 8:48; Ezek. 6:9; Jer. 41:10, 1 Chron. 6:36-38, 25:12, 28:8.
5. Author’s translation. Unless otherwise indicated, the rest of the translations are taken from the NIV.
6. Especially revealing is the manifold use in Leviticus, where a range of illicit sexual relations is enumerated.
7. Intransitive in the Qal and Nif’al, transitive in the Hif’il
8. Eccl. 4:11.
9. Jer. 13:24.
10. Jer. 10:21, 23:1-2
11. E.g., Isa. 24:1; Jer. 30:11; Ezek. 12:15.
12. E.g., Isa. 30:24; Jer. 4:11, 51:2; Ezek. 5:10.
13. Ps. 1:3.
14. Deut. 29:23; Jer. 23:14, 49:18; Lam. 4:6.
15. E.g. Num. 10:9; Deut. 30:7; 1 Sam. 2:1; Pss. 18:3, 41:2, 44:5, 78:66; Gen. 14:20.
16. Author’s translation.
17. Lam. 3:61-66.
18. 2 Kings 22.
19. “Nation” in this context refers to the southern kingdom of Judah.
20. Jer. 25:9, 27:6, 8, 9, 13.

21. Unless otherwise specified, the arguments and numbering of the verses are based on the MT.
22. Jer. 4:6, 16; 6:1, 22.
23. Jer. 4:13, 29; 6:23.
24. Gen. 18:16–19:29.
25. Jer. 6:17-19.

THE EXILE OF GOD: THE GALUT IN JEWISH CONSTRUCTION

Wilfred van de Poll

This chapter seeks to explore some of the ways in which Jewish tradition has “remembered” the Exile, building on the insights of Jan Assmann, who claims that every group continually reshapes and creates its past by remembering it. I will argue that, at first, the Exile was seen as a very negative event. It was caused by Israel’s sins and its purpose was merely to punish Israel for its misbehaviour. In later times, however, more positive interpretations were construed. The Exile came to be understood by some as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Finally, in Jewish mysticism, the Exile was seen as the blueprint, the pattern of creation, and indeed, of the Creator as well. In this view, Israel’s Exile was a reflection of the exile of God.

Thus, in highlighting some of the “stages” which marked the long process of appropriation and reinterpretation of the Exile in Jewish tradition, I aim to show that the Exile is not a just a story of some forgotten past, but that, time and time again, it acquired new depths of meaning and was made to speak in fresh, exciting ways to the needs of the age.

Some Preliminaries: Method and Terminology

Assmann’s Idea of Collective Memory

“Forgetting is exile. Remembrance is redemption,” the Baal Shem Tov, according to tradition, used to say. And true enough, Jews are good at remembering. It is a community that lives by remembrance. We may do well, however, to realize what we do when we “remember.” According to Jan Assmann, every social group has its “collective memory.” This collective memory is labelled by him as “das Kulturelle Gedächtnis,” a specific term relating to the social realm. It does not apply to individual memory – if indeed there is such a thing at all. Nor is Assmann concerned with memory of acts or things or speech alone. He is interested in how these three categories