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3. Exile as Identity in Persian Yehud

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Abstract

This paper examines relevant biblical texts to investigate the question of how the offspring of the Judahite deportee population in Babylon – former members of Jerusalem’s elite society – managed to capitalize on a particular interpretation of their national past in order to further legitimize ownership of the name “Israel” over and against any and all competing claims. A close reading of relevant biblical texts discloses an identity strategy based on this in-group’s self-assertion that as a priestly community it had endured a searing divine punishment on behalf of the people, thereby sanctifying itself as the sole agent of redemption for a newly restored, divinely-favored nation. Less explicit in the biblical text, but no less significant, is the community’s strategy regarding outsiders – most notably Judahites who had not been deported – all of which are largely ignored by biblical writers. These strategies combine to forge the dominant, repatriated community’s self-identity in a manner consistent with the classical model of social identity theory pioneered by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, which in its most basic formulation asserts that members of an in-group seek to establish and strengthen their own community’s collective strength and influence at the expense of one or more proximate out-groups.

Key words: Hebrew Bible, Babylonian exile, Persian period, Ezra-Nehemiah, Jewish identity

Introduction

Relocation of the upper echelons of conquered city-states was an essential feature of imperial hegemony in the ancient Near East. Details surrounding the fates of several displaced populations are all but lost to history; however, it is a reasonable assertion that each refugee community would have been faced with the task of reestablishing meaning and identity within their unsettled worlds. The Hebrew Bible witnesses to the efforts of at least one of these communities to renew its self-understanding as a once dislocated, subsequently relocated social group. This paper examines relevant texts of the Hebrew Bible to investigate the question of how the offspring of this deportee population – members of Jerusalem’s formerly elite society – managed to capitalize on a particular interpretation of their national past in order to further legitimize ownership of the name “Israel” over and against any and all competing claims.

A close reading of relevant biblical texts discloses an identity strategy based on this in-group’s self-assertion that as a priestly community it had endured a searing divine punishment on behalf the people, thereby sanctifying itself as the sole agent of redemption for a newly restored, divinely-favored nation. Less explicit in the biblical text, but no less significant, is the community’s strategy regarding outsiders – most notably Judahites who had not been deported – all of which are largely ignored by biblical writers. These strategies combine to forge the dominant, repatriated community’s self-identity in a manner consistent with the classical model of social identity theory pioneered by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979, 1986), which in its most basic formulation asserts that members of an in-group seek to establish and strengthen their own community’s collective strength and influence at the expense of one or more proximate out-groups.

Methodology

This study assumes the historicity of Jerusalem’s sixth-century BCE destruction at the hands of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and his mercenary armies, along with its related population displacements towards Babylon and Egypt. It applies literary-critical methodologies – specifically redaction criticism and rhetorical analysis – to relevant biblical texts, in order to examine how their rhetorical strategies interpret the past to create a new present. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Haggai, and Zechariah 1–8 are of primary importance, as they ostensibly offer the most contemporary witnesses to the community’s own self-perception and outlook; however, of secondary importance are the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, the fertile seedbed in which the roots of this community’s transforming self-identity germinate. Also, because scholarship is sharply divided over the extent to which these relevant biblical texts reflect actual history or simply rehearse an ideological projection aimed at reinforcing an in-group’s singular identity, findings from the archaeological record of Persian Yehud supplement this literary-critical approach solely for the purpose of identifying any potential scribal excess.

Brief Overview of the Exilic Period (597–515 BCE)¹

The book of Jeremiah (52:28-30) posits three Judahite deportations to Babylon, the first of which is dated to 597 BCE, during which 3,023 persons, a suspiciously precise but plausible number, are said to have been dragged off on a several months' journey to Babylon. The Deuteronomistic Historian (DH) also addresses the deportations, including among the first wave of exiles the eighteen-year old King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), the Queen Mother, and a host of elite members of Jerusalem society. According to the book of Ezekiel, the priest Ezekiel ben Buzi is also exiled during this time. The second displacement followed the revolt of King Zedekiah in 587 BCE, at which time the Babylonian armies destroyed Jerusalem's palace-temple complex and, according to Jeremiah's scribe, deported 832 persons. Finally, the third major displacement, which would have occurred some five years later, affected 745 persons, with others having apparently fled to Egypt to avoid the wrath of further Babylonian reprisals. Although probably not historically reliable, according to the book of Jeremiah, the total number of exiles was "four thousand six hundred" (52:30).

By contrast, DH states that 10,000 people had been deported from Jerusalem, so that "no one remained, except the poorest people of the land" (2 Kings 24:14). DH's later assertion that "Judah went into exile out of its land" (2 Kings 25:21) effectively minimizes the significance of those left behind by Nebuchadnezzar's armies to serve as "vinedressers and tillers of the soil" (2 Kings 24:14; 25:12; Jeremiah 52:12-16). The fact that these remainees are mentioned, albeit hardly so, is enough to betray the scenario of a total deportation, the so-called "myth of the empty land" (Bright: 324; Barstad).²

The priestly author of Chronicles, writing many years after the fact, also barely identifies a single group of survivors – namely, those who escaped the sword and were exiled; nevertheless stating that the whole land of Judah remained desolate until it "made up for its sabbaths" (2 Chronicles 36:17-21). As a witness to the reestablishment of the exiled priestly presence in Jerusalem, the Chronicler sees this triumphal event as a sign that Israel's sabbaths had at last been fulfilled. By contrast, the material record of the southern Levant indicates that only sporadic population displacements had occurred throughout Judah during the neo-Babylonian period. In sum, the attempt to delegitimize and otherwise obscure the remaining population is evident in both Deuteronomistic and Priestly sources.

Details about life in exile are as elusive as the description of the deportation itself; but in light of certainly unspeakable hardships of displacement and alienation from the ancestral estate, the amount of property and wealth reportedly in the hands of at least some exile families witnesses to a life of rapid adaptation, industry, and interconnectedness (Smith-Christopher 2002). If evidence from the fifth-century BCE is admissible, the famous Murashu tablets found at Nippur at the end of the nineteenth century attest to many high-level business transactions with dozens of families bearing Yahwistic theophoric names (Waters:

¹ The literature on this period is quite expansive (see Ahn and Middlemas). Earlier studies include Albertz; Middlemas; Smith-Christopher 1989. See Stern (303-350) for an archaeological overview.

² Although these scholars challenge the assertion of an empty Judah (and Jerusalem), their conclusions regarding the effects of the Babylonian destruction and deportation could not diverge more. Bright posits widespread destruction with a significant disruption in the region, while Barstad asserts far less of an impact.

168-71). A recent discovery of unprovenanced tablets reportedly discovered in Iraq, if authentic, also shed light on the life of at least some exiles in Babylon during the sixth-century BCE; however, these remain to be studied or even verified (Baker).

Biblical descriptions of the return to Jerusalem are no more forthcoming. Most scholars agree that the returning priestly families occurred in two waves, the first of which returning early in the Persian period – sometime between the triumph of Cyrus (539 BCE) and the dedication of the Second Temple (ca. 515 BCE). According to Ezra 1-6, this initial migration included Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, grandson of the exiled King Jehoiachin and descendant of David, who along with his high priest Joshua ben Jozadak established the foundation of a new temple. A second migration occurred sometime during the mid-fifth century BCE, corresponding to the leadership of the Ezra and Nehemiah.

At this point, several communities may be identified in relation to the Babylonian destruction and/or displacements, each of which faced the challenge of redefining itself in light of radically new situations under Persian rule:

- Those deported to Babylon in 597 BCE, who under the leadership of the exiled Aaronid priest/prophet Ezekiel ben Buzi, were compelled to develop a new self-legitimation strategy living apart from the temple in a distant and impure land (Rom-Shiloni: 140-56);
- Those deported in 586 BCE, who were forced to abandon the notion that God would ultimately protect Jerusalem from destruction as he did in the face of the Assyrian siege of 701 BCE, and come to grips with the fact that Jeremiah's prophecies concerning the city's imminent and inevitable destruction had been realized;
- Subsequent deportee and refugee communities dragged off into Babylon or fleeing toward Egypt, some of which were of the mind that they were displeasing God by abandoning the land (Jeremiah 43:1-7);
- Those Judahites who were not displaced, but remained in the land, at least some of which may have harbored rural attitudes that accepted or even embraced the punishment of national leadership as a form of divine retribution, and their own remaining in the land as a kind of vindication for faithfulness to some form of Yahwism, perhaps including its syncretistic, agricultural forms (see Chaney for a discussion of prophetic discourse in light of the reality of peasant life);
- Non-Judahites, most notably the Samaritans, who lived in the vicinity of Judah and comprised a diverse population of Yahwist and non-Yahwistic peoples (Kessler: 92-121).
- Families of the first wave of Babylonian exiles to return to their ruined homes, for which those remaining in Babylon seem to retain the status of "core community" (Rom-Shiloni: 34);
- Families of the second wave, returning to Jerusalem a century or more later, who closely identified and integrated with the first wave of returnees (Becking: 12).

The Persian Period, the Bible, and Archaeology

The Bible is all but silent on the Persian period, oddly so given the fact that the Tanach receives its definitive shape during this time. There is no reference to Persians in the Pentateuch or the Deuteronomistic History, only in the biblical texts mentioned above, a fact that suggests that the Tanach likely received its definitive shape and structure as a defined collection of scrolls during this period. But even for these Persian-period texts, the actual geographical, political, and demographic scope of the repatriated community, including its actual relationship with the Persians, remains dubious and obscure.

The material record also provides only scant information, albeit of a different sort – conditioned by the fact that as a continuously viable city, Jerusalem offers very limited opportunities for excavation. As a result, the scope of the administrative settlement in Jerusalem within the putative geographical boundaries of Persian-period Yehud is the latest arena in debates between archaeologists and biblical scholars. Contention remains polarized, given that historical reconstructions are based on two primary sources of information: on the one hand, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, especially the details associated with the building of Jerusalem’s city wall (Nehemiah 3); and on the other hand the material record – most reliably the distribution record of Persian-period seal inscriptions recovered from throughout the region (Finkelstein: 40).

In Ezra-Nehemiah, the geographical landscape is not always clear. Here the province governed from Jerusalem seems to comprise several districts (*pelekhim*), extending “from Beth-Zur in the south to the area of Mizpah in the north . . . and from the Judean desert in the east to Keilah in the west” (Finkelstein: 40; see also Carter; Stern; Lipschits). However, according to Finkelstein, the number of seal impressions recovered throughout the region does not support the landscape Nehemiah envisions. Seal impressions are most common in the area around Jerusalem, including Ramat Rachel on the southern edge, with none found further south. Six seal impressions have been recovered from the highlands toward the north of Jerusalem, with six more found in the area of Jericho and Ein-Gedi. Four additional seals were found at Gezer and Tel Harasim in the western Shephelah, which are “places clearly outside the borders of Yehud until the expansion of the Hasmonean state,” with none found in the upper Shephelah (43).

Nehemiah 3 describes Jerusalem as a large city “fortified by a major wall with many towers and gates,” but the material record does not support this picture. Maximalist views based almost solely on the Bible extend Jerusalem’s dimensions from the City of David to the western hill, while a minimalist perspective would limit Persian Jerusalem to the southeastern hill, the Ophel, and the Temple Mount (Stern: 434-35). Finkelstein’s interpretation of Persian-period Jerusalem is that of an unfortified village with a few hundred inhabitants, confined to roughly 5 to 6 acres in the central part of the City of David (40-44). Although there exists very limited data concerning Jerusalem’s architectural past, Finkelstein asserts that Nehemiah’s description of a great city, “. . . if not utopian, may represent the reality of the construction of the First Wall by the Hasmoneans in the 2nd century BC.” He concludes that Persian-period Yehud appears to have comprised mainly the area of Jerusalem between Ramat Rachel and the City of David (44), a distance of roughly 6 kilometers.

Striking a balance between the maximalist interpretations supported by the text, and the minimalist picture offered by the material record, Persian-period Yehud nevertheless remains a relatively small polity, yet one that apparently minted its own high quality silver coins, maintained Hebrew (at least as a written language) in a largely Aramaic-speaking world, and appears to have remained in good standing with their Achaemenid overlords. On the basis of both textual and material remains, it appears that this relatively small temple polity survived by capitalizing on the fact that it found favor in the eyes of both God and emperor. It is in this privileged self-understanding that the particulars of the community's unique in-group identity may be discovered.

The Roots of In-Group Identity in the Major Prophets

Historically, Judah's predicament was that it lay in the looming shadows of Assyria and Babylon along the route toward Egypt, its salacious neighbor toward the south – the beautiful heifer (Jeremiah 46:20), with whom Israel and Judah often flirted.³ From the perspectives of the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Judah's safety would have been assured had it only remained faithful to its national deity. Samaria, portrayed as Jerusalem's adulterous elder sister, offered a model for what not to do; thus, the prophets judge Jerusalem to be even more wicked for not having surmised the consequences of covenantal disobedience from her example (Jeremiah 3:6-11; Ezekiel 23:1-21).

Given that Ezekiel and Jeremiah represent two distinct priesthoods, identified in Deuteronomistic literature as "priests and Levites," were extracted from Jerusalem at different times, and ended up in different locations (Babylon and Egypt respectively), one would expect to find contrasting in-group perspectives in the books ascribed to them, as is the case. Generally speaking Ezekiel, an Aaronid priest, is concerned with matters of national purity. For him, the fundamental human predicament is that God brings disaster upon Jerusalem for its uncleanness, and "so that they may know that I am God," a phrase that occurs in some form or other nearly sixty times throughout the book.

By contrast, Jeremiah generally displays Deuteronomic-type concerns over injustice (e.g., 5:26-27; 12:1-4), false prophecy (23:16-17), and popular, non-Yahwistic forms of worship (10:2-5). The fundamental human predicament for Jeremiah is summed up in Jeremiah 5:19:

And when your people say, "Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?" you shall say to them, "As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so shall you serve strangers in a land that is not yours.

Despite contrasting perspectives over the precise description of their nation's predicament, both prophets are in agreement that Jerusalem's destruction is both inevitable and imminent as a result of its breach of covenantal fidelity.

³ DH indicates that the relationship was no secret, recording the words of the Assyrian Rabshekah in his attempt to get Jerusalem to surrender: "See, you are relying now on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it" (2 Kings 18:21).

A more thorough examination of the differences between Ezekiel and Jeremiah in their respective responses to displacement cannot be offered here. It suffices to point out that in the first deportation the priest Ezekiel had become separated from his altar and that he and his community were forced to find legitimacy in light of the fact that they were no longer living in the “land of promise.” Ezekiel accomplishes this with a twofold strategy: He condemns Jerusalem’s remaining leaders, who dispossess the exiles from any ongoing claim to inheritance of the land (11:1-13) and contribute to Jerusalem’s wanton, whorish idolatry (Ezekiel 16). At the same time, he witnesses the glory (*kābôd*) of the Lord leaving the city, asserting that it now dwells among the exiles:

Mortal, your kinsfolk, your own kin, your fellow exiles, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, “They have gone far from the Lord; to us this land is given as a possession.” Therefore say: Thus says the Lord God: Though I removed them far away among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone . . . Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. And the glory of the Lord ascended from the middle of the city, and stopped on the mountain east of the city (Ezekiel 11: 15-16, 22-23).

Following the destruction of the temple, a second wave of exiles joins the Babylon community and comes to share the predecessor community’s self-perceived role as the legitimate abode of Israel’s God (Rom-Shiloni: 120-21, 147).

As for Jeremiah, it is telling that the prophet manages to avoid both deportations, whether due to happenstance or his relative lack of status as a mere Levite. For Jeremiah, the destruction of the temple does not, nor need not negate the obligation of remaining in the land promised to Abraham. Jeremiah seems to advocate maintaining a presence in the land, as evidenced by his purchase of a field in Anathoth (32:8-12), but his lonely voice in support of remaining in the land was short-lived. Ironically, fearing further reprisals from Babylon following the assassination of Gedaliah, Jeremiah’s friends spirit him off into refuge in Egypt (43:6).

Although both Ezekiel and Jeremiah envision a restored temple, the opening words of Deutero-Isaiah speak to the actual turning point in the story of exile and return:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins (Isaiah 40:1-2).

It is clear from the rest of the passage that the author is addressing the exile community, not the people left behind in Jerusalem or its environs. The exile is cited as a punishment for Jerusalem’s sins, but now that Jerusalem has served her term (*mālē’ā šēbā’āh*), the exiles, whose atoning punishment redeems Jerusalem, will be led back to a barren and bereaved city (49:19; 51:11; 52:8-9) in the midst of an empty and desolate land (51:3; 61:4; see also Rom-Shiloni: 106-107). All of this is made possible through the coming of God’s anointed one (*mēšīah*), Cyrus the Great (45:1), and God’s miraculous leveling of the topography, making a

straight and level path for the exiles' return to Zion (40:3-4). It is within the context of a bruised, redemptive people that the so-called "servant songs," celebrated by the gospel writers as prophecies of Christ's passion, should be read and understood.

The first servant song (Isaiah 42:1-7) speaks to the orderly establishment of justice set before the inhabited world, even to the coastlands of Phoenicia (42:4). It is easy to see some degree of political posturing here in anticipation of building a special relationship with the Persian administration as a reliable, loyal vassal in Judea. The established temple polity will not only be a responsible social body, but a shining example to the nations that surround it.

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations (42:6).

The second servant song (49:1-6) transitions to a collective first person perspective, best understood in the context of a self-appointed leadership role in God's work of raising up of the tribes of Jacob in the restoration of "Israel" (49:6), claiming for itself primacy of place as God's people. The light to the nations motif is iterated, a symbol of the Servant's mission to extend salvation to the end of the earth.

The third servant song (50:4-9) continues with the first-person pleading, but introduces the theme of Israel's willful endurance of unjust antagonism and pain. The Servant speaks to the nations with the tongue of a teacher in the midst of great suffering and persecution, but even though the Lord is not absent from him, there is effort on the part of the Divine to deliver him.

Finally, the fourth servant song (52:12-53:12) introduces the meaning and purpose of the suffering. Reverting to third person observational discourse, the mission of the Servant is described as an atoning, substitutionary self-offering, which God has brought about – an act that carries with it both a redeemed and redemptive significance (Nickelsburg: 12). Although the poem is well known, it is worth repeating a significant portion of it here in order to make the point that according to the writer it is God's will that the Servant be bruised and that the suffering is an offering for sin. Evangelistic interpretations aside, this song can only be a sober collective self-justification of the poet's in-group:

. . . he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed . . . the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. . . it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper (53:4-10).

In sum, the books of the Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel address the reasons for the destruction of Jerusalem in terms of God's judgment against Judah for apostasy and

forsaking its covenantal obligations. For priestly scribes to accept the prophetic critic of kingship and cult is to accept an extraordinary admission of professional fault in answering the question of what had gone so terribly wrong that God would destroy his own house. The only way a priestly community would be likely to adopt such a scathing self-indictment for itself is if it could take it up and wear it as a badge of honor forged of the molten ore of reconstituted shame. To the extent that this was a genuine national sentiment likely cannot be known. In any case, offering itself as an agent of redemption in taking on the sins of the nation, it appears the prophetically influenced priestly scribes adopted a sacerdotal solution for re-establishing a fortified, legitimized sacred identity in Jerusalem.

Haggai and Zechariah (1–8)

The books of Haggai and Zechariah witness to the earliest days of the first-wave return of the Judahite exile community. Led by Zerubbabel ben Shealtiel, the possible grandson of the exiled King Jehoiachin, and his high priest Joshua ben Jehozadak, the remnant of the people (*šě'ērît hā'ām*) are compelled to give special and immediate attention to the task of rebuilding the temple. Haggai exclaims, "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" (1:5). The fact that Haggai focuses on Zerubbabel and Joshua and their followers supports the fact that he is addressing the returnees (Rom-Shiloni: 80). In fact, he mentions no other inhabitants. The picture of Yehud is one of a desolate land plagued by drought and famine, made so because the temple lies waiting to be rebuilt (1:7-11).

Haggai's exclusion strategy is to ignore the remainees; so, too, the book of Zechariah. Like Haggai, Zechariah contributes to the shaping of in-group identity by reinforcing its identification as a remnant of the people via the Babylonian exile. Acknowledging that the destruction and deportation had left the land desolate, the exiles are now permitted to return to their homes and claim a legitimate right to the land, strengthened by cordial relations with the Persian administration, likely through ties "back home," that is, Babylon. For our purposes, what is most significant about the book of Zechariah is that it clearly establishes the returning community as one who has suffered for Jerusalem's sins (1:2-6), in a manner recalling the fourth servant song. Now that the seventy years of punishment have passed, the Lord proclaims his return to Jerusalem (1:16) for the purpose of instituting a new covenant mediated by a new temple.

Ezra-Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, originally one book in the Hebrew and Greek canons, begins with Cyrus the Great's triumph over Babylon and a liberating, prophetic edict:

The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people – may their God be with them! – are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem (1:2-3).

Following this statement of imperial favor, several lengthy genealogies and lists coalesce to create a picture of a social group that identifies itself exclusively as the Israelite people

(Gerstenberger: 9-10; Rom-Shiloni: 39-40). As in Haggai and Zechariah, this singular group identifies itself with a core community in Babylon, referring to itself as an escaped (*pēlēṭā*) remnant (Ezra 9:8, 15) and “children of the exile” (*bēnē haggōlā*) Rom-Shiloni: 34-35). The detailed genealogies define the boundaries of the community’s shared identity, establishing exclusive legitimacy in the narrative present, delimiting, strengthening, and preserving the in-group/out-group relationship.

The community’s exclusive in-group status is supported by its claim to both Deuteronomistic and Priestly national traditions such as the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan under Joshua. “Casting themselves as the heirs to and guardians of the historical heritage of Israel, the Repatriates from Babylon build a powerful argument advocating their exclusive status as the one and only legitimate community of Judeans, Jews – people of Israel, people of God” (Rom-Shiloni: 40-41). However, this identity status includes culpability for the sins of the nation. In a letter sent by Tattanaï, Persian governor of the Ebar Nahara satrapy, to King Darius, regarding the rebuilding of the temple, he recounts the returnees’ story: “. . . because our ancestors had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this [former] house and carried the people away into Babylon” (5:12).

Unlike Haggai and Zechariah, which ignore the Judahite remainees and anyone else in the vicinity of Jerusalem, Ezra’s opponents include certain unidentified adversaries of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 4.1) and the equally obscure “people of the land” (*‘am hā’āreṣ*), some of which actively oppose the building of the temple. But who are these groups and how many stood in the way of the Repatriates’ plans to re-establish themselves in Jerusalem? Did they include Judahites who had remained in the land? Descendants of persons displaced by Esarhaddon (4:1-3)? Descendants of Assyrian settlers who mingled with people left behind? The ruling class of Samaria, or Governor Tattenai and his associates? For the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, the identity of the outsiders is of no importance; the point is that against all odds the temple will be built. This amalgamation of the opposition, which Becking describes as a mystification of the Other, is part of a strategy that presents the opposition as multi-ethnic descendants of deportees brought by the Assyrians from the corners of the earth, people with no previous connection to God, his people, or his land (39-41).

The exclusivity of the in-group is further affirmed through the reported practice of forced endogamy. It comes to Ezra’s attention that the “holy seed has become mixed with the peoples of the land” (9:2), raising the question of whether this exclusivity to be based on ethnic as well as religious grounds, for the command exceeds the demands of Torah (Exodus 34; Deuteronomy 7), which only warns against and forbids the act of intermarriage (Becking: 38). Ezra takes things further by forcing an ex post facto solution, namely the dissolution of exogamous marriages and the sending away of wives and children.

It is worth noting that the wives Ezra’s offending male citizens are said to have married represent the Bible’s classical foreign peoples, namely “the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites” (9:1). There is no concern for actual ethnic or national identification – all are lumped together – because ultimately those outside the sacred boundaries do not matter. But what is

noteworthy is the fact that nowhere on the landscape does one find any mention of Judahites who had remained in the land (Rom-Shiloni: 44).

In the book of Nehemiah, the opposition continues, most notably led by Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and his official, Tobiah, joined by Geshem the Arab and various Ammonites and Moabites. In contrast to Ezra, these opponents are named and as is appropriate for the time and place in question; however, the identity strategy is the same, namely one of exclusion based on the in-group's self-understanding as the rightful inheritors of a re-established Jerusalem. Notably absent from Ezra-Nehemiah is any explicit identification of Judahite remainees. They are simply written out of history, either by being altogether ignored or subsumed under the guise of foreign or mixed ethnicities. "[I]n all of the following areas – genealogy, religion, culture, national history, law, and politics – the Repatriates are “the Judeans (Jews),” the true Israel (Rom-Shiloni: 44-45).

Conclusion

Biblical texts that witness to the return of Babylonian exiles to Jerusalem reveal a comprehensive strategy of identity formation aimed at legitimizing this repatriated community's claim as true Israel. The process required establishing a line of continuity with the past by admitting culpability in the disruption of the covenantal relationship with the national deity, remedied by the assumption of the status of redemptive agent in having borne the sins of the nation as God's suffering servant (Isaiah 53), until such a time as all of the nation's sabbaths have been fulfilled (2 Chronicles 36:21). Heralding the coming of Cyrus as God's messiah, this social group's status is further legitimized by claims of divine and Persian imperial favor apparent throughout the books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra-Nehemiah. On the flipside, this process of identity formation also carries with it the delegitimization of various out-groups – rival contenders to the title and the land. Here we see the writing out of history of the Judahite remainees, their ethnicity impugned by lumping them all together as an amalgam of Israel's legendary or actual foreign adversaries.

Thus we see that the full extent of the grand narrative of Israel's past – celebrated by the world's Jews, Christians, and (to a lesser extent) Muslims – is ultimately the story of *an* Israel's past – an Israel that is more specifically Judahite; even more specifically Jerusalemite; yet even more particularly limited to deported members of Jerusalem's elite society; and, most particularly of all, an Israel whose membership comprised a relatively small, perhaps two-stage migration of Jerusalem's exiled priestly elites' second- and third-generation offspring, who managed to retrace their forebears' steps back to Judea during the Persian period.

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