

[p.120]

8

Exile and Return

‘By the Waters of Babylon...’

‘...there we sat, indeed we wept as we remembered Zion’. Thus, the exiles in Psalm 137, bitter and melancholy, far from their homeland. That exile in distant Babylon varied for different members of the Hebrew community. Like Ezekiel ‘by the river Chebar’, most would be out in the villages and farms of the Babylonian plains, put to work on agriculture and irrigation, canal-cleaning and the like. Others would find employ for their various skills. The leaders were taken to Babylon itself. The royal family were kept at the court of Nebuchadrezzar II, and accounts of their food-allowances for the years 595-570 BC (in grain and oil) have been found in basement storerooms of the royal palace, possibly a building that had once supported the famous ‘hanging gardens’ of Babylon.¹ Jehoiachin and his sons were thus looked after well enough, but essentially under a form of house arrest. Such arrangements and allowances—under pleasanter circumstances—are mentioned again later for Jehoiachin in the reign of Awil-Marduk (‘Evil-Merodach’) about 560 BC, in 2 Kings 25:27-30. The Judaeans in Babylon had been long since counselled by Jeremiah to make the best of their lot in that metropolis (Jeremiah 29).

1. The Concept of Exile

In modern histories of Israel and Judah, or of the Old Testament, the exile in Babylon tends to feature as the exile, and even

[p.121]

its own with initial capital-letter as ‘the Exile’, as though it were something unique. A drastic experience, at first totally unnerving and tending to induce despair, it undoubtedly was for those who actually were compelled to travel far eastwards to the hot Mesopotamian plains, and be paraded through Babylon as helpless captives of the victors. But once there, life had to continue somehow—and it did, despite the melancholy of Psalm 137. Before the calamitous crash of 586 BC, the Judaeans had stubbornly hoped on for deliverance from Babylonian capture, somehow—that hope, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had to condemn. But once the crash *had* come and the people were carried off into seeming despair, then both Jeremiah (30-31, etc.) and Ezekiel (36-37, etc.) had to proclaim that all was not finished, that in God’s plan for the ages there was a future for his erring people. Thus, continuing life was not merely existence, but could have hope and purpose.

Thus this exile was only one instance of a custom of ancient Near Eastern warfare that had existed as a threat to all smaller nations and peoples in that area for untold centuries before. In the Old Testament itself, there had already been the Israelite exile in Assyria beginning from

¹ Ration-tablets translated by Oppenheim in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 308, and by W. J. Martin in D. W. Thomas (ed.), *Documents of Old Testament Times*, 1958, pp. 84-86. Cf. study by W. F. Albright, *Biblical Archaeologist* 5 (1942), pp. 49-55.

734 and 722 BC, executed in two phases under Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kings 15:29) and by Shalmaneser V and Sargon II (cf. 2 Kings 17:6; 18:11). From the Assyrian vantage-point, indeed, these two deportations were merely incidents, part of a long series in the Levant and elsewhere. Away back in Moses's time, in the thirteenth century BC, Shalmaneser I deported young people of Urartu (Ararat) into Assyria, and likewise exiled some 14,400 prisoners from the middle Euphrates region (Hanigalbat).² In the late twelfth century BC, Tiglath-pileser I copied this practice, and from the ninth century BC onwards (beginning with Assur-nasir-pal II and Shalmaneser III), exile was an economic and political weapon exploited by every Assyrian monarch who waged foreign wars. Nor were the Assyrians the first or only state to impose exile on defeated foes. Again, in the thirteenth century BC, Ramesses II of Egypt is described as the one who removed southerners to the north, northerners to the south, easterners to the west, and westerners to the east, and in practice Ramesses III (c. 1180 BC) transported Libyans and Sherden into Egypt.³ Still earlier, the Hittite king Mursil II repeatedly deported subject-populations on the grand scale—15,300 one year, 66,000 another year, and so on.⁴ Centuries before Moses, back in the eighteenth century BC (Mari), in the seventeenth century BC (Hattusil I of the Hittites), and the fifteenth century BC (Tuthmosis III and IV, Amenophis II, of Egypt), deportation of defeated peoples in upper Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Canaan itself recurs in the in-

[p.122]

scriptions of the victors in these periods and places.⁵

Therefore, the threat of exile far from home was *always* a reality that overshadowed the smaller nations or peoples like Israel, even from long before the days of a Moses or a David or a Solomon, right down to the eventual deportations of the Hebrews in the eighth century BC to Assyria and in the sixth to Babylon. Thus, threats of deportation among sanctions on disobedience in (e.g.) Leviticus 26:33, 39, 41, or Deuteronomy 28:36, 41, 64, are *not* reflections of the Babylonian exile written up afterwards (as 19th-century dogma has it), but are simply *one* of the *constant* potential fates that the 'small' nations had always to envisage at the hands of 'great powers', from one age to the next. Away back in the sanction-curses that end his 'law-code', Hammurabi of Babylon (c. 1750 BC) calls down upon any ruler who should offend against these laws 'the dispersion of his people', and that the goddess Inanna should 'deliver him into the hands of his enemies, and may they carry him away in bonds, to a land hostile to him!'⁶ Here, formulated as early as the patriarchs, is the threat of exile from Babylon! The references in Leviticus and Deuteronomy are equally generalized, and hence cannot be used of themselves to date any part of these works so late as the Babylonian exile, or to any specific exile. In hindsight, of course, we can view the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles as 'fulfilments' of such sanctions, but not as actually historically present in the original writing of these passages. The generality of such sanctions in law, treaty and covenant is likewise illustrated by Esarhaddon's treaty with Baal, king of Tyre, in the curses of which we

² Translated, D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria*, 1, 1926, pp. 39-40 (§§ 114, 116), 57, 59-60 (§§ 164, 171); A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, I, 1973, pp. 81, 82 (§§ 527, 530).

³ References, Kitchen in J. B. Payne (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, 1970, pp. 6, 20, n. 42.

⁴ References, *ibid.*, nn. 37-41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, nn. 28-36.

⁶ Stela, cots. (reverse) xxvi:75, and xxviii:15-25, cf. translation by Meek in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 179, 179-180.

find: ‘may (the Tyrian gods) Melqart and Eshmun deliver your land to destruction, and your people to be deported...’,⁷ which in fact had no final historical fulfilment.

Thus, the Babylonian exile must have affected the captive Judeans deeply; but it was not a unique event. And, as we have seen, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel pointed forward to the future, saying that there was hope to come.

2. The Significance of the Babylonian Exile

It has sometimes been thought that this brief period of some fifty to seventy years was *the* creative period for Old Testament literature, when old traditions were either collected or simply ‘invented’, to be set down firmly in writing for perhaps the first time. The sixth century BC is characterized as a period when Egypt and Babylon both looked back to their ancient glories, reviving modes of one, even two, thousand years before. However, this picture is beset with logical fallacies and factual errors. Ancient glories were indeed harked back to, in both Egypt and Babylon. But only in a

[p.123]

few outward trappings. Thus, in Babylon, archaic forms of signs and words might be used in a certain proportion of monumental or commemorative inscriptions—but the day-to-day administration was run (and recorded) on strictly contemporary lines and in, current script. In Egypt, the officials (like their pharaohs) used ancient titles upon monuments, but in practice functioned within the reformed, fairly centralized administration of the vigorous Saite Dynasty 26 (c. 664-525 BC), with everyday texts written in increasingly flowing script—demotic, which took over steadily from the older hieratic. In literature in both civilizations, while new work was produced, the sixth century BC was definitely not a great ‘creative’ period, rather an age of conservation. In Mesopotamia, the scribes copied and recopied already long-extant classical Akkadian literature (even the long-outdated laws of Hammurabi) and adapted bilingual Sumero-Akkadian texts; little new was created (so far as we know), other than royal inscriptions, some hymns, and further rituals. In Egypt, similarly, there were rather fewer new works to set alongside the recopying of old, classical Middle Egyptian literature, and even the recopying of the Pyramid Texts for late funerary use from the originals of nearly two millennia before. It was, strikingly, an age of conservation, not creation. Therefore, if anything of the spirit of the age ‘rubbed off’ on the Hebrews in Babylonia, it would—again—be the recopying, conservation, of *already-existing older literature*, far more than the creation of numerous fresh new works. The opposite myth—that much of the Old Testament was essentially ‘created’ at this period—rests (1) on a gross misunderstanding of trends in the ancient Near East in the seventh-sixth centuries BC, and (2) upon now outdated nineteenth-century theories about the stitching-together of purely imaginary literary strands.⁸ (J, E, P, D) into the present-day ‘five books of Moses’, plus analogous (and equally unrealistic) theories of the origins of much else in the Old Testament. On the basis of these modern myths, the supposed literary productivity of a cowed and conquered people within just fifty to seventy years was both phenomenal in scale and wholly anomalous in character. Instead, we should view Hebrew literary activity in the sixth century BC as, again, largely conservational—copying and preserving already existing works, with minimum of editing, far more than the writing of wholly new ones. Deliberately fashioned,

⁷ Translation, cf. E. Reiner in Pritchard, *op. cit.*, 3rd ed., p. 534, (iv), or *Supplement*, p. 98.

⁸ On which matter, cf. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient & OT*, pp. 112 ff.

archaic literary works were produced neither in Egypt nor in Babylon—nor, therefore, should they be assumed for the Hebrews. Instead, in the sixth century BC, original Hebrew writings were of limited number, if of memorable quality—the completion of Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s prophetic books, and the book of 1-2 Kings which derived most

[p.124]

of its content from pre-existing first-hand sources.⁹ Plus either the latter part of Isaiah or the book of Daniel,¹⁰ depending on one’s philosophical prejudices and attitude to the nature of biblical prophecy. Among pure poetry, we may include a few psalms like Ps. 137, and Lamentations (whether written by Jeremiah or not). The original Hebrew writings of the exilic period were thus of importance, but not nearly so numerous as has often been suggested. The period was seen as one of divine chastisement, with deliverance to come—a time for taking stock of basic values, and of retaining a heritage in hope of a better future.

The Silver Age

During the reigns of Nebuchadrezzar’s successors in Babylon, a formidable new power had arisen in neighbouring Iran. During the reign of Nabonidus (whose son Belshazzar was regent in Babylon), Cyrus of Persia took over the larger Median realm, becoming also king of the Medes, by 546 BC.¹¹ In autumn of 539 BC, after a battle at Opis for the province of Babylon,¹² Cyrus’s troops quickly occupied Babylon itself, in which city Cyrus himself was hailed as liberator a few days later.

Cyrus instituted new policies, and decreed the return of subject peoples and their gods to their homelands, principally in and adjoining Mesopotamia.¹³ Thus, his decree to the Judeans in Babylon allowing those who wished to return to Judea (Ezra 1:1 ff.) has long been recognised as being in line with the policy, acts and decrees of Cyrus and Darius I as known from other and first-hand sources.¹⁴ Thus, the temple at Jerusalem was modestly rebuilt, despite delays, under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, it being completed by 515 BC, focus for a restored Jewish community. Encouragement came from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah; later, perhaps, Malachi sought to stir up a disillusioned community that had lapsed into slack ways. They were the last of the preaching and writing prophets. Besides the restored community in Judea and Jerusalem, large communities of Jews continued to live and thrive in Babylonia. Others,

⁹ Among ‘minor prophets’, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habbakuk and perhaps Obadiah functioned during the half-century before the fall of Jerusalem.

¹⁰ Much of the criticism of the book of Daniel rests on mistaken views long since outdated. The language of the book, especially the Aramaic, is best datable to the 6th-4th centuries BC, less easily later. Its historical allusions (not merely to the Maccabean age) are of a quality far superior to Judith and related works, for example. Cf. Wiseman, Mitchell & Joyce, Martin, Kitchen, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel*, 1965 [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/book_daniel.html]; more recently, A. R. Millard, *Evangelical Quarterly* 49/2 (1977), pp. 67-73 [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/daniel1-6_millard.pdf].

¹¹ Text published by Gadd, *Anatolian Studies* 8 (1958), p. 77; cf. Oppenheim in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 3rd ed., p. 562f. (*Supplement*, 126f); Wiseman in Thomas (ed.), *Documents of Old Testament Times*, 1958, p. 83, and in *Notes on ... Problems ... Daniel*, p. 13.

¹² For the sequence of events, see S. Smith, Isaiah XL-L Y, 1944. (Schweich Lectures), pp. 45-7, cf. p. 152, n. 142.

¹³ E.g., Cyrus Cylinder text, cf. Oppenheim, Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 316.

¹⁴ Examples and references, Kitchen, *Old Testament in its Context*, 1973, pp. 37-8, and nn. 26-29.

likewise, in Egypt, as is evidenced by the archives (in Aramaic, sister tongue of Hebrew) of a body of Jewish mercenary soldiers and their families at the south end of Egypt, manning a garrison on Elephantine island (close to Aswan).

During the fifth century BC, the puny community in Judea still had its troubles. Ezra the scribe paid visits there from Babylonia in 458 BC and later, to regulate spiritual life and to fend off absorption of the Jews by their neighbours through injudicious intermarriages (book of Ezra). In 445 BC, Nehemiah (cupbearer to Artaxerxes I of

[p.125]

Persia) got permission to visit Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. In his efforts, Nehemiah was opposed by three jealous neighbours: Sanballat I, governor of Samaria just to the north; Tobiah, governor in Ammon, eastward across the Jordan; and Geshem or Gashmu, 'the Arabian', to the south (Nehemiah 2:19).

Each of these three has received some illumination from archaeological sources. Longest-known and most familiar is Sanballat of Samaria. He is named as father of two sons (one, Delaiah) in one of the Aramaic papyri from Egypt (Elephantine), of 408 BC, to whom the Jews there appealed for help.¹⁵ Sanballat's family kept control of the Samaria governorship for about another century, down to the time of Alexander the Great—evidence for Sanballat II, Hananiah and Sanballat III is provided by a series of papyri (c. 350-330 BC) found not far from Samaria in recent decades.¹⁶ A parallel family-line of governors of Ammon is also known to have succeeded Nehemiah's second foe for many generations—their tombs, including a once-splendid mausoleum or temple(?), are known at Araq el-Emir in Transjordan.¹⁷ The most enigmatic of Nehemiah's opponents was the third—'Geshem the Arabian'. He turns out to have been, in fact, the most powerful and dangerous of the trio. From the ruins of a small pagan shrine in the Egyptian east Delta came a set of eight fine silver vessels of the period of the Persian Empire, three being inscribed. One splendid dish is inscribed: 'What Qaynu son of Geshem, King of Qedar, brought (as offering) to (the goddess) Han-Ilat!'¹⁸ The kings of Qedar had the confidence of the Persian kings, and a realm that stretched from North Arabia across Edom and Sinai to the borders of Egypt. Hence the seriousness of rumours spread by such a 'key man' against Nehemiah, and the sinister tone of the phrase 'and Gashmu says it ... (Nehemiah 6:6).

Thus the Old Testament closes with the biographical narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century BC. Also to that period belongs Chronicles. This is a history in part parallel with that represented by Genesis to Kings, with supplementary material, and notably different

¹⁵ Cowley series, Nos, 30/31; translated, Ginsberg in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 492.

¹⁶ See F. M. Cross, *Biblical Archaeologist* 26 (1963), pp. 110-121, and in D. N. Freedman and J. C. Greenfield, (eds.), *New Directions in Biblical Archaeology*, 1971, pp. 45-69, and references, Bright, *History of Israel*, 1972, p. 412, n. 10. Governors of Judah, cf. N. Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-Exilic Judean Archive*, (Qdem 4) 1976, esp. pp. 30-36.

¹⁷ On the family, cf. Mazar, *Israel Exploration Journal* 7 (1957), pp. 137-145, 229-238; tombs at Araq el-Emir and general history, cf. McCown, *Biblical Archaeologist* 20 (1957), pp. 63-76. Latterly, cf. P. W. Lapp, *Bulletin, American Schools of Oriental Research* 165 (1962), pp. 16-34, *ibid.*, 171 (1963), pp. 9-39, and in Avi-Yonah (ed.), *Encyclopedia, Archaeol. Excs., Holy Land*, II, pp. 527-531.

¹⁸ Full publication, I. Rabinowitz, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 15 (1956), pp. 1 ff. and plates 6-7; unaccountably omitted from later editions of Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, and *Ancient Near East in Pictures*.

perspectives in time and in emphasis. 1 Chronicles spans primeval and early Hebrew history in the briefest form from Adam to David by a series of genealogies, some in Genesis-Kings, some from quite other, independent, sources, and devotes its main account to David's reign. 2 Chronicles covers the period from Solomon's accession to the fall of Jerusalem, ending with the same harbinger of hope—Cyrus's decree—that begins Ezra. The contrast in treatment of the earliest traditions and history in Chronicles and in Genesis is very striking, and shows the change in perspective across the centuries. In subject-matter, Chronicles is especially

[p.126]

concerned with religious matters—the cult and temple under David and Solomon, and the history of faith and apostasy under their successors. Chronicles stands near the end of Old Testament history-writing, designed for the use of a religious community bereft of political independence, whose hope lay in its faith as the anchor also of its identity in the world. The religious traditions of the past were thus kept as a stimulus to present and future hopes. In these functions, Chronicles was not wholly alone in the outgoing ancient Near Eastern world. Beginning under Persian rule and especially under the regime of the foreign (Macedonian) Ptolemaic kings during the third to first centuries BC, the priests of Egypt's great temples also consigned their immemorial religious traditions to major compilations both on papyrus (mainly lost) and on temple-walls (in good measure preserved), these being the spiritual focus of a populace denied political freedom. In Mesopotamia during the fifth to first centuries BC, the gradually shrinking number of cuneiform scribes and scholars likewise kept alive their literature and traditions, often centred on the temples. In all of these terminal legacies—Chronicles included—is preserved a large amount of valuable information, often of very early origin, even when cast in later form.

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