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The Concept of Exile
in Ancient Israel and its Historical Contexts

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Total Exile, Empty Land and the General Intellectual Discourse in Yehud

EHUD BEN ZVI

The ubiquitous concepts of “Empty Land” and “Total Exile” along with their associated metanarratives in the pre-late-Persian period required, and resulted in, the creation of social memory and forgetfulness that demands exploration, and an explanation for its success. This chapter addresses these matters and as it does so, it draws attention to ways in which claims for a total exile and an empty land were deeply involved in the ideological discourse of Yehud at the time.

Cultural memories are created by and within societies that are anchored in particular historical circumstances. It is usually agreed, even among scholars who tend to disagree on many areas, that the area of Benjamin was substantially less affected by the destruction associated with the Babylonian campaign of 586 BCE, and that its population constituted by far the largest group in neo-Babylonian Judah and early Yehud and their economic center.¹ If this is the case, then those living in

¹ See, for instance, O. Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005); idem, “The History of the Benjamin Region Under Babylonian Rule,” *TA* 26 (1999): 155-90; idem, “Demographic Changes in Judah between the 7th and the 5th Centuries BCE,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (eds. O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 323-376; C. E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (JSOTSup 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); idem, “Ideology and Archaeology in the neo-Babylonian Period: Excavating Text and Tell,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 301-22; E. Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, II: The Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Periods (732-332 BCE)* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 321-26. Despite all their differences, compare on this matter, M. Stern, “The Babylonian Gap: The Archaeological Reality,” *JSOT* 28 (2004): 273-277 (esp. 276); and J. Blenkinsopp, “The Bible, Archaeology and Politics; or The Empty Land Revisited,” *JSOT* 27, no. 2 (2002): 169-187 (esp. 183-84); or B. Oded, “Where is the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’ to be Found? History versus Myth,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 55-74; and H. M. Barstad, “After the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’: Major Challenges in the Study of Neo-Babylonian Judah,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 3-20. On the general issue of the Benjaminites area during the neo-Babylonian period see also, among others, J. Zorn, “Tell en-Nasbeh and the Problem of the Material Culture of the 6th Century,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 413-447; idem, “Estimating the Population Size of Ancient Settlements: Methods, Problems, Solutions and a Case Study,” *BA-*

Benjamin and some other areas in Judah that were not completely depopulated after 586 BCE certainly knew that the land was not empty after the destruction of the monarchic polity; after all, they themselves remained in the land.² One would expect that actual continuity would have led to the development of social memories that stress such a continuity, but instead, the dominant metanarrative about the past and its related social memory that developed in Yehud was one that stressed total exile, an empty land, and a (partial) return.³

SOR 295 (1994): 31-48; J. Zorn, J. Yellin and J. Hayes, "The M(W)SH Stamp Impressions and the Neo-Babylonian Period," *IEJ* 44 (1994): 161-183; and the survey and bibliography in L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1; Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (LSTS 47; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 22-30.

- 2 In addition to Benjamin, the Bethlehem-Tekoa area, and perhaps the Beth Zur area, is often mentioned among the regions in which a settlement remained. See O. Lipschits, "The Rural Settlement in Judah in The Sixth Century B.C.E.: A Rejoinder," *PEQ* 136 (2004): 99-107 and bibliography cited. It should be mentioned that there is considerable debate about the archaeology of the Persian period—Lipschits' article itself was a rejoinder to A. Faust, "Judah in the Sixth century B.C.E.: A Rural Perspective," *PEQ* 135 (2003): 37-53. There is a substantial debate concerning particular sites such as Beth Zur, Gibeon, and in general about the extent of settlement in the Persian period and its total population. Among recent works on these matters, see I. Finkelstein, "Archaeology and the List of Returnees in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *PEQ* 140 (2008): 1-10; and idem, "Jerusalem in the Persian (and Early Hellenistic) Period and the Wall of Nehemiah," *JSOT* 32 (2008): 501-520. It is worth noting that the main gist of my argument would not be affected if the position argued by Finkelstein is accepted; there would still be the matter of memory and forgetfulness and its deep involvement in discourses of empty land and full exile (see below) since (a) no one denies that there is evidence for some settlement during the Persian period and (b) a very large section of the (if Finkelstein's position is correct, much smaller) population would still likely consist of the descendants of those who remained in the land. In fact, one of Finkelstein's points is that the main text supporting a massive return (namely, the list in Ezra 2:1-67; Nehemiah 7:6-68) cannot be used to reconstruct demographic shifts in Persian Yehud. Finally, most of the texts reflecting and shaping the discourse mentioned in this article belong to the Persian period, and in fact, to the pre-Chronicles period, which I date to the late Persian and perhaps very early Hellenistic period; in other words, they belong to the pre-late Persian period.
- 3 Numerous recent works have approached the mythical role of the concept of total exile and empty land. See, for instance, R. P. Carroll, "The Myth of the Empty Land," *Semeia* 59 (1992): 79-93; H. M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the 'Exilic' Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996).

I would like to stress that the present study focuses on early Yehud, before the putative time of Ezra or Nehemiah and well before the time of the writing of Ezra 1-6 and Ezra-Nehemiah. I also do not base any argument in this essay on the assumption that the world depicted in Ezra-Nehemiah reflects the historical circumstances of the shared discourse of literati in the pre-late Persian period. To reconstruct the latter, I prefer to use pentateuchal, the (so-called) dtr. history and prophetic literature. See my "Towards an Integrative Study of the Production of Authoritative

A number of explanations for this seemingly unlikely development are possible. One may argue, for instance, that the dominant metanarrative represented the viewpoint and worldview of hegemonic social/political group(s) that actually came back from the Babylonian exile.⁴ If one follows this approach, the following scenario evolves.

To sustain this group's hegemonic position from an ideological perspective, it developed a discourse in which the presence of "others" (that is, those who remained in the land) was ideologically and narratively erased resulting in the "empty land," which was to be filled by them. Since "no one" remained, the entire period before the arrival of the returnees becomes of no relevance to the "national" history, which in fact, continues through those who have been exiled, and mainly to Babylonia.⁵ Within this discourse of exclusion, the history of renewal and return set about by YHWH is understood as involving only "exilic Israel."⁶ Israel thus becomes "exilic Israel" and any other group becomes a kind of evolutionary dead end, in any case certainly not "Israel."

Moreover, this scenario emphasizes that the discourse included a moral dimension, as the erasure of those remaining in the land through discursive extermination or total eradication from the land involved also the denigration and marginalization of groups that might have

Books in Ancient Israel," in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (eds. D. V. Edelman and E. Ben Zvi; London: Equinox, 2009), 15-28.

- 4 Among recent works, see D. Rom-Shiloni, "Exiles and Those Who Remained: Strategies of Exclusivity in the Early Sixth Century BCE," in M. Bar-Asher, D. Rom-Shiloni, E. Tov and N. Wazana, *Shai le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, its Exegesis and its Language* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2007), 119-38 (Hebrew). Rom-Shiloni reconstructs a multi-generational social and ideological conflict between two communities, the exiles/returnees on the one hand and those who remained in the land on the other. According to her, both groups developed a separatist, exclusivist ideologies that carried a sense of self-supremacy, and eventually due to social, political, economic and other related reasons, the community of exiles/returnees overcame the other.
- 5 See 2 Kgs 25:11-12; 25-26 and note how the national narrative moves outside the land, to the Babylonian exile (2 Kgs 25:27-29). Although in many ways different, according to Chronicles the national narrative resumes with the note about Cyrus encouraging exiles to return to Judah to contribute to the building of the temple that YHWH has charged him to build.
- 6 This concept does not necessarily support the scenario that I will depict and criticize below. On this matter, see my "Inclusion in and Exclusion from Israel as Conveyed by the Use of the Term 'Israel' in Postmonarchic Biblical Texts," in *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström* (eds. S. W. Holloway and L. K. Handy; JSOTSup 190; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995), 95-149, in which I dealt with some of the issues I raise here from a different, but overall complementary perspective.

remained.⁷ Not only do they go nowhere and are eventually removed from the land, they also fully deserve it. Furthermore, the obvious typological links in Yehudite discourse between Babylonian return and the Exodus on the one hand, and the first conquest of the land and the second settlement of the land on the other, would associate non-returnees with non-Israelites whose sins made them unworthy of living in the land.⁸

This scenario is obviously about a discourse made to discriminate among groups in society. One may argue that narratives of erasure of the other were related to socio-political realities such as exclusive membership in the (Persian sponsored) *golah*/temple/charter-community in whose hands rested the regional power.⁹ One may connect these narratives of erasure to the economy and maintain that they reflected a struggle over land between the returnees and those who remained, with the Persian center supporting the former.¹⁰

There is no doubt that a large number of texts in the HB (e.g., Jer 24; Ezek 33:21–29) *might* be understood within this explanatory frame and that aspects of this scenario are reflected in the main metanarrative present in the HB and most likely the social memory at least among Yehudite literati.¹¹

7 Negative characterization may serve as a prelude to discursive extermination; see, for instance, Jer 24. For a different approach, but which ends in a narrative, total eradication of the presence of “those who may have remained,” see Jer 40:1-41:18.

8 Cf., among many others, R. P. Carroll, “The Myth of the Empty Land,” esp. 85; K. W. Whitelam, “Israel’s Traditions of Origin: Reclaiming the Land,” *JSOT* 14 (1989): 19-42. See also M. Liverani, *Israel’s History and the History of Israel* (London: Equinox, 2005), esp. 250-91.

Among the many biblical references that associate the sins of Israel that caused the latter’s total exile with those of the nations that were before Israel in the land, see Lev 18:24-28; Deut 18:9-13; 1 Kgs 14:24; 2 Kgs 21:2.

9 Cf. R. P. Carroll, “The Myth of the Empty Land,” 85; and D. Rom-Shiloni, “Exiles and Those Who Remained.” Cf. the earlier work in J. Weinberg, *The Citizen-Temple Community* (JSOTSup 151; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); cf. C. E. Carter, *Emergence of Yehud*, 296. For the suggestion of a chartered community see J. Kessler, “Persia’s Loyal Yahwists: Power Identity and Ethnicity in Achaemenid Yehud,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (eds. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 91-121. (Kessler does not think that the charter proposal accounts for the quasi-ubiquity of the empty land motif.)

10 This narrative is relatively common and has influenced even recently, among others, G. A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 140-43.

11 See, for instance, R. P. Carroll, “The Myth of the Empty Land.” For a comparative study of the most significant discussion of these texts, see J. Kessler, “Once Again, the Motif of the ‘Empty Land’: Reflections on the Intersection of History, Ideology and Community in Sixth-Century BCE Literature,” in this volume.

This scenario, however, still has to explain why the Benjaminites and other non-returnee groups that constituted the vast majority of the population accepted these narratives.¹² Again, on the surface, this does not seem to be so difficult. Three possible approaches to the question emerge within this scenario; groups that were discriminated against by the returnees eventually co-opted the memories of those whom they would have seen as their oppressors and rejected their own might have done so because of, a) a kind of social “Stockholm syndrome,” b) a more lengthy process by means of which disenfranchised groups attempt to improve their lot by identifying with those in power and eventually end up fully assimilating to them, or c) forceful assimilation of the disenfranchised group by the center. One may support options b) and c) in particular by bringing up other cases in history in which marginal groups ended up joining the dominant socio-cultural group and through the process either co-opted or were co-opted into memories that not only were originally foreign to them, but also contradicted their previous self-understanding and memories.¹³ In other words, new identities could lead and very often do lead to new memories. Images of the past are reshaped by the present of those who create and revisit them.

Did I convince you? I hope not, since, despite all its appeal, this scenario as a whole is very unlikely. To begin with, it is based on the assumption of a central conflict between a few returnees supported by the Persian center and much larger local communities—that is, between Jerusalem and its temple, and, for the most part, the rest of Yehud. It is also based on the assumption that such conflict occurred in the early Persian period and was likely resolved through the exercise of power

12 See, for instance, the population estimates in O. Lipschits, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 270.

13 It may be noticed, however, that for the most part, these processes took time. There is not so much time from the beginning of the incipient temple in Jerusalem in the early Persian period to the moment in which the temple and its leadership became central to Yehud (see TAD A 4.8), and the cultural memory processes I am referring to and which were related to the success of Jerusalem and its temple are to be associated with the period in between; the same holds true for the wide acceptance in Yehud and Yehud’s literature of the concept of Jerusalem’s absolute centrality. On the latter, cf. M. D. Knowles, *Centrality Practiced: Jerusalem and the Religious Practice of Yehud & the Diaspora in the Persian Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006). (D. Edelman dates the resettlement of Jerusalem and the building of the temple later. See D. Edelman, *The Origins of the ‘Second Temple’: Persian Imperial Policy and the Rebuilding of Jerusalem* [London: Equinox, 2005]. I remain convinced that a small incipient temple/cultic institution was established early in the Persian period and that around that temple, Jerusalem began to develop in a manner commensurate with its temple. Because of the people associated with this incipient temple, the city was resettled at the time, even if by relatively few people.)

with the following features: a) it was resolved in a matter of a few generations—unless one would maintain that the Pentateuch, dtr-H, and prophetic literature were a kind of sectarian literature that was accepted only by Temple centered and Torah centered returnees in Jerusalem, but not elsewhere in Yehud;¹⁴ b) it was resolved with those remaining in the land (i.e., the vast majority) fully capitulating and not only accepting the social, political, and economic primacy of the returnees over them, but also adopting their “enemies” memories, identity, and ideology as their own.

Several considerations work against this construction. To begin with, at the very core of this scenario stands a Jerusalemite temple community, a local center supported by the Persians that excludes most of the residents of the province. The historical likelihood of such a community during the early Persian period is very slim. An incipient temple with no agricultural lands would likely try to bring in the residents of the province, rather than keeping them out. The demographic situation in Jerusalem and its rural surrounding areas¹⁵ makes exclusion a very unlikely policy for officials at the temple. From the perspective of the imperial center, the well-known tendency to support and befriend local elites was meant to stabilize provinces and ethnic groups, but forceful, long term support for a small minority of returnees over and against the vast majority of the population of the province is not consistent with such a goal; moreover, if a central temple was supposed to serve as a fiscal center in the province, what would be the point of

14 Cf. K. L. Noll, “Was There Doctrinal Dissemination in Early Yahweh Religion?” *BibInt* 16 (2008): 395-427, who maintains that these texts do not necessarily reflect the beliefs of the scribal community that produced and read them and that such a community never intended to disseminate the contents of its literary repertoire.

15 H. Geva recently estimated that the population of Persian period Jerusalem reached no more than 1,000 people, as does O. Lipschits, whereas I. Finkelstein estimates about 400-500 people, “that is, not much more than 100 adult men.” C. Carter’s earlier estimates mentioned 1,500-3,000 people. Similarly, the total population of Yehud has been estimated between a low of 15,000 to 20,000 to a high of 30,000 people. See H. Geva, “Estimating Jerusalem’s Population in Antiquity: A Minimalist View,” *El* 28 [Teddy Kollek Volume] (2007): 50-65 (Hebrew); I. Finkelstein, “Jerusalem in the Persian (and Early Hellenistic) Period;” idem, “Archaeology and the List of Returnees;” O. Lipschits, “The Size and Status of Jerusalem in the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods,” in *Judah between East and West: The Transition from Persian to Greek Rule (ca. 400-200 BCE)* (eds. O. Lipschits and L. L. Grabbe; LSTS; London/New York: T. & T. Clark, forthcoming); idem, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*; and C. E. Carter, *Emergence of Yehud*. Given that the degree of development of the environs of an ancient city serves as indirect evidence for the size and population of the city, see also A. Kloner, “Environs in the Persian Period,” in *New Studies on Jerusalem* (eds. A. Faust and E. Baruch; Ramat Gan, Israel: Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies, 2001), 91-95 (Hebrew), which provides a picture coherent with the one advanced in the studies mentioned above.

excluding most of its inhabitants?¹⁶ One may note that the likely role of Mizpah in Benjamin as the capital of the province during the early and decisive period also speaks strongly against this scenario. Finally, there is no account of such practices in the HB, and no significant text in Haggai, Zechariah, or Malachi refers to them.¹⁷ Furthermore, if one were to argue from Ezra 1–6, a text clearly later than the period covered here,¹⁸ one should note that it incorporates *the entire population* of Yehud into the community as returnees.¹⁹

Of course, there were negative characterizations of Benjamin in the Jerusalem-centered discourse of the period, as one would expect from literature shaped in an incipient temple that had to stand competition,²⁰ but these attacks were not only set well in the past, but also fully integrated within a general discourse that emphasized social and regional cohesion in the form of central connective concepts such as transtempo-

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- 16 On the matter of temples as fiscal centers see, for instance, J. Schaper, "The Jerusalem Temple as an Instrument of the Achaemenid Fiscal Administration," *VT* 45 (1995): 528-39; idem "The Temple Treasury Committee in the Times of Nehemiah and Ezra," *VT* 47 (1997): 200-06. The presence of a treasury in Jerusalem may have contributed to the shift of the provincial capital from Mizpah to Jerusalem. Cf. C. Tuplin, "The Administration of the Achaemenid Empire," in *Coinage and Administration in the Athenian and Persian Empires* (ed. Ian Carradice; BAR International Series 343; Oxford: B.A.R., 1987), 109-66 (128, 130).
- 17 On Zechariah 1-8 see J. Kessler, "Diaspora and Homeland in the Early Achaemenid Period: Community, Geography and Demography in Zechariah 1-8," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. J. L. Berquist; SemeiaSt 50; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 137-66 (158-66).
- 18 On Ezra 1-6, see, among others, H. G. M. Williamson, "The Composition of Ezra i-vi," *JTS NS* 34 (1983): 1-30; reprinted in idem, *Studies in Persian Period History and Historiography* (FAT, 38; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 244-70.
- 19 Ezra 10:29 constructs a later period, but it is worth noting that it suggests that membership into the community was open to those who identify with its ideology and socio-cultural (including cultic) norms.
- 20 For the general tendencies discussed here see C. Edenburg, "The Story of the Outrage at Gibeah (Judg 19-21): Composition, Sources and Historical Context" (Phd Thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2003), passim. Edenburg relates some of the ideological tendencies of the story to tensions between a Jerusalem centered group and Benjamin during the early Persian period. Particularly relevant to the case here are the multiple negative references to Bethel and Beth-El in prophetic books and elsewhere (particularly in Kings, and probably in a "hidden way" in the episode of Bochim; see Judg 2:1-5). On these issues see also J. Blenkinsopp, "Benjamin Traditions Read in the Early Persian Period," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, 629-45; Y. Amit, "The Saul Polemic in the Persian Period," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, 647-61. For an argument in favor of a Saulide-Davidic rivalry in the early Persian period, see D. Edelman, "Did Saulide-Davidic Rivalry Resurface in Early Persian Yehud?" in *The Land that I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the ancient Near East in Honour of J. Maxwell Miller* (eds. J.A. Dearman and M.P. Graham; JSOTSup 343; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 69-91.

ral Israel and memory of a kingdom of Judah that involved both Judah and Benjamin.²¹

In summary, the “Empty Land” motif and its related concepts of exile and return, present us with a good case in which discursive erasure most likely did not arise as a mystified representation from the worldly ambitions for power of a colonizing or elite group. Significantly, the same can be said of the (partial) erasure of the Canaanites in Joshua.

But if so, how to explain the social and ideological process that led to a systemic preference for “Empty Land” over its alternatives (e.g. continuity) within the discourse of Yehud, particularly since the images of “Empty Land” and “Return” stood so strong against the historical experience of the majority of the population, including its political and economic centers? Why would people develop and turn into a core feature of their self-understanding a counterfactual social memory, of whose counterfactualness they were well aware? Why would a group adopt a social memory that erases its experience in the recent past, if not under duress (be it political, economic, associated with a sense of dis-honor,²² or any combination of the above)?

I would like to advance that the explanation may have much to do with discursive and ideological needs. Of course, the latter do not exist

21 The ubiquitous, collective memory of a Judahite monarchy that included both Judah and Benjamin contributed to the social cohesion of Yehud (see 1 Kgs 12:21, 23; Jer 17:26).

P.R. Davies associates the development of the concept of biblical Israel in Judah/Yehud with processes of social cohesion in neo-Babylonian and Persian period Judah/Yehud. See, for instance, his “The Origin of Biblical Israel,” *JHS* 5 (2005): available at <http://www.jhsonline.org>.

By the time of Chronicles, the pair Judah – Benjamin is attested numerous times (e.g., 2 Chr 11:1; 3, 10, 12, 23; 2 Chr 15:2, 8, 9; 25:5; 31:1) and serves above all to communicate a sense of boundary and separation between Yehud (i.e., Judah and Benjamin, which are conceived as inseparable) and Samaria.

This historical tendency towards integration, which clearly reflects the actual historical necessities of the period, may also be responsible for the fact that, eventually, the priestly line of the second temple was construed as being Aaronide, a line that seems to have been originally associated with Bethel. It is possible that non-Jerusalemite centered Aaronides were eventually co-opted by the Jerusalem center, or that they took it over and contributed to its shaping. In either case, the end result is social and ideological integration. See J. Blenkinsopp, “Bethel in the Neo-Babylonian Period,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 93-107; idem, “The Judaeen Priesthood during the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: A Hypothetical Reconstruction,” *CBQ* 60 (1998): 25-43.

22 It is difficult to imagine that those who remained in the land associated dis-honor with remaining in the land, unless they already accepted the metanarrative about Israel’s total exile. But in that case, they would be “exilees/returnees,” along with the rest of Israel/Yehud.

in a vacuum, but are experienced, developed, and imagined within particular historical settings—I will return to this point. To begin with, the concept of “Empty Land” was deeply interwoven with a significant number of other central metaphors, and metanarratives associated with the concept of “Exile.” A result of this high connectedness was that people could not easily reject the “Empty Land” motif without rejecting so many central motifs and ways of thinking about the past binding the community together; after all Yehudite Israel was a text and memory centered community.

As is well-known, YHWH’s anger on account of the sin of Israel/Judah and their leaders was seen as the fundamental reason for the collapse of the monarchic polity, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the severe blow to the rural population in Judah. This type of explanation is common in the ancient Near East and consistent with the motif of the foundational role of the divine in human affairs. Although it was used by imperial powers and conquerors, it also served in the interest of those defeated, who despite the adversity they faced could through this narrative not only maintain the centrality and power of their own deity/deities but even further extol it. In addition, an emphasis on previous sin provided a sense of agency to the defeated community and a poignant story meant to socialize it in terms consistent with the local elites’ understanding of sin and piety, which is now presented as unequivocally supported by a tragic divine action in history. Significantly, this basic metanarrative tends to conclude with some form of restoration of proper order. The “grammar” of this metanarrative requires an element of closure. In this regard and not surprisingly it fits well the postmonarchic discourse in Judah/Yehud.²³

The image of YHWH’s wrath and abandonment of the place used to explain the disaster of 586 BCE was related to and partially evocative of, from another perspective, a claim concerning the presence of impurity. After all, impurity is that which repels divine presence. Once the matter is approached from this perspective, then the pollution created by sinful human activity during the monarchic period must be driven out of the land, for if this is not the case, the community will certainly fall. The logic of this line of thinking requires that the land passes through a purification period. This leads to the image of the land as

23 Metanarratives that could interweave the goals of the local and imperial/hegemonic elites were often preferred, given the tendency for the latter to rely on the former and vice versa. For examples of the basic narrative mentioned above see the Curse of Agade, the epic of Tukulti-Ninurta (and his explanation of his victory over Kashtiliash II), Nebuchadnezzar I’s epic, Esarhaddon’s explanation for the destruction of Babylon, Adad-guppi’s autobiography, and the Mesha Inscription.

resting, replenishing, and purging itself. The ready metaphor for this process is that of the fallow land.²⁴ A lack of people is more consistent with that image than their presence or diminished presence.²⁵ In any case, any community living on the still polluted land cannot but fail and disappear. Within the logic of this approach, remaining in the land was either not an option or path to a dead end. A viable community, as Persian period Yehud would have imagined itself, would be more likely to be construed within this line of thought as (mythically) re-found on a purified land.

Another consideration: one of the results of the postmonarchic attribution of kingly features to Israel (the so-called “democratization”)²⁶ is that Israel is the child of the deity. But “child” is only one common type of family subordinate; the other is “wife.” Given common hierarchical gender constructions and the “maleness” of king/shepherd YHWH, it is only expected that Israel be construed in this discourse as YHWH’s wife. In this context, Israel’s sin was imagined in terms of adultery, exile associated with divorce or at least expulsion of Israel from YHWH’s space, and the hope for the future in terms of marital reconciliation.²⁷ Now, within the social and ideological logic of this image, Israel/the wife could not have been imagined as half expelled from the matrimonial house, that is, the land. Israel as whole must be expelled from the land. This basic and common metaphor leads necessarily to a construction of the exile as full and complete, and to that of an empty land.

Of course, female Israel can also be construed in terms of Jerusalem (see Ezek 23), in which case it has to be imagined as both fully destroyed and as rebuilt or about to be rebuilt; after all, the metanarrative cannot conclude with the story of a final, irrevocable estrangement and permanent divorce between wife Israel and husband YHWH. The image of female Jerusalem is, of course, an example of the widespread ancient Near Eastern topos of the city as a woman. This topos, in the context of lamented past destruction and present rebuilding, is central

24 Cf. Lev 26:34-35, 43; 2 Chr 36:31.

25 Cf. Lev 18:24-28; 20:22.

26 The idea of a covenant between the people and YHWH instead of the king and YHWH is at the core of Deuteronomy and Exodus-Numbers and serves as the most salient example of this tendency. Another example involves the “democratization” of royal myths of origin; see, for instance, J. Van Seters, “The Creation of Man and the Creation of the King,” *ZAW* 101 (1989): 333-42. Within Chronicles there is a clear trend to reshape the narratives of Samuel-Kings in a way consonant with these “democratization” tendencies; see S. Japhet, *The Ideology of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought* (BEATAJ 9; 2d rev. ed.; Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1997), 416-28.

27 An obvious example for the use(s) of this metaphor is Hos 1-3.

to “City Laments.” Expectations associated with City Laments include references to the destruction of the city due to the wrath of a male deity/deities, divine abandonment, and *total destruction*, irrelevant of the actual historical situation.²⁸ But if both Jerusalem and the land stand symbolically for Israel, and the capital city stands for its territory and polity (as usual in the ancient Near East), then both Jerusalem and the land have to be imagined as fully destroyed, and Israel as exiled in its entirety.

Without doubt one may claim that the ideology according to which Jerusalem can and does stand symbolically for Judah is one that would have been particularly promoted by the incipient temple in Jerusalem, with the likely support of the Persian center. But certainly it was at the core of monarchic period discourse and the perception of Judah outside its borders (cf. ABC 5, rev. l. 12). Yehud could not have rejected this construction without substantially erasing any claims of continuity between Persian Yehud and monarchic Judah. But already the name “Yehud” (not Benjamin) points to an internal and external ideology of continuity and to a self-identity based on that continuity, and external recognition and support for it.²⁹

This sense of self-identity is directly and deeply involved in a metanarrative of restoration that moves from “David” to “Cyrus,” and from monarchic Judah to provincial Yehud, and from monarchic temple to Persian temple—including a return of the presence of YHWH and symbols of continuity in the form of vessels claimed to be from the first temple in the second one. Metanarratives of continuity between two different periods, tend to de-emphasize the element and period of discontinuity. This explains why there is little narrative space allocated to the neo-Babylonian period or any aspect of the early Persian period that was not related with the re-establishment of the temple and Jerusa-

28 See D. Edelman, “The ‘Empty Land’ as a Motif in City Laments,” in *Ancient and Modern Scriptural Historiography / L’Historiographie Biblique, Ancienne et Moderne* (eds. G. J. Brooke and T. Römer, BETL 207; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 127-49 and bibliography.

29 Cf. the area surrounding Babylon after the destruction of the city by Sennacherib. The surrounding population and the “external world” kept a sense of self-identity associated with Babylon at the center. Cf. the closer case of Rabbat Ammon, which was likely destroyed by the Babylonians and ceased to be the capital of the province for a while (O. Lipschits, “Ammon in Transition from Vassal Kingdom to Babylonian Province,” *BASOR* 335 [2004]: 37-52), but eventually became again the center of the area afterwards. There are numerous comparable cases both from ancient times to the present (e.g., few think that Bonn had a real chance of remaining the capital of Germany for long after unification; cases of moving the capital by a local/national elite/ruler are different; e.g., Dur Sarrukhin, Brazilia).

Jerusalem in ancient Israelite historiography.³⁰ Little narrative space in authoritative historiography creates less sites of memory within the world of the community shaped around the reading of the relevant historical narratives. The memory of the community centered in Mizpah, of neo-Babylonian Judah/Benjamin, is thus less and less evoked and becomes more and more absent from the main shared discourse. In the metanarrative of Jerusalem to Jerusalem, Judah to Judah/Yehud, temple to temple there is very little room for Mizpah. The “original” memories of the Benjaminites become more and more marginal, as those who may evoke them see or imagine themselves as Israel/Yehud.³¹

This of course does not mean that the Benjaminites themselves become marginal, but that their self-identity becomes subsumed under a more general one. The temple in Jerusalem would have encouraged such a process. The literature produced by literati associated with the Temple most likely co-opted traditions from the area (see the Pentateuch). Even some of the Bethel leadership (sons of Aaron?) may have been co-opted and might eventually taken leadership positions in Jerusalem.³² But neither the incipient and poor temple of Jerusalem nor a small number of returnees (even if supported by the Persian center for a while) could have forced the long term acceptance of an extraneous self-identity and ideology upon the vast majority of the population during the early Persian period against their will and through oppression. The Benjaminites and others were most likely not passive objects, rather, they are historical agents too.

Historical communities do not develop a full discursive logical consistency. But at least in the case of Yehud, it seems that the logic of a

30 Cf., among others, S. Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 353-66, 416-31; E. Ben Zvi, “What is New in Yehud? Some Considerations,” in *Yahwism after the Exile* (eds. R. Albertz and B. Becking; STAR 5; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 32-48. Of course, as usual, there are a few exceptions to the rule; see the story of Gedaliah, a matter I deal with elsewhere: “The Voice and Role of a Counterfactual Memory in the Construction of Exile and Return: Considering Jeremiah 40: 7-12,” in this volume.

31 In other words, a discursive and ideological “need” to stress continuity between two different periods contributes to, and shapes elements of social memory forgetfulness. For a comparative study of this type of social (and historiographical) processes, see K. M. Stott, “A Comparative Study of the Exilic Gap in Ancient Israelite, Messenian and Zionist Collective Memory,” in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography* (eds. G. N. Knoppers and K. A. Ristau; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 41-58.

32 See J. Blenkinsopp, “Bethel in the Neo-Babylonian Period,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, 93-107; and note above. One may note that it is reasonable to assume that some of the Mizpah elite were likely co-opted by Jerusalem, when the latter became the capital of the province.

particular discourse and the sort of narrative plots and typological connections that evolved out of a widely accepted metanarrative had an important impact in terms of systemic preference and dis-preference for social memories. This is not surprising, since the latter are closely associated with matters of social cohesion and self-identity. Those living in Benjamin and others whose ancestors remained in the land knew that the land was not empty after the destruction of the monarchic polity, and so did the few returnees and the literati in Jerusalem. But preference for a social memory that they knew to be counterfactual—despite the tensions and at times faulting lines that the situation creates—can be explained in terms of discursive needs, and particularly since the preferred memory became necessary to sustain and support numerous concepts, plots, and metaphors enabling the community to understand itself and maintain a sense of hope for the future expressed in terms of purified land, marriage with YHWH, permanent cultic divine presence, or the like.

In sum, the social success of the concepts of “Total Exile” and “Empty Land” cannot be explained in terms of their supposed function in an exclusivist, discriminatory, and oppressive social system imposed by a community of exiles/returnees over and against a community of remainees that included the vast majority of Yehud. The successful (for the most part) erasure of social memories of continuity among Benjaminites and other groups of remainees and their replacement with memories that they knew to be in one sense counterfactual had less to do with long term oppression or exclusion of the vast majority of the population—and even less with an ideological, mystified representation of an historical oppression—than with the inner logic of the shared central discourse that evolved through time and through social negotiation among local groups living a few hours walk from each other in early Persian Yehud. To be sure, this social negotiation included tensions and processes of co-opting and being co-opted, but also contributed, through the integrative discourse it created, to social cohesion and to a construction of self-identity in Persian Yehud. Because it involved a shared discourse about the fall of the monarchic polity, causality in history, and strong claims of continuity with monarchic Judah, the discourse had to bear a strong message of settlement discontinuity, exile, and empty land.

A final word: Benjamin is no Samaria. No process comparable to the inner Yehudite, which involved above all Benjamin and Jerusalem but perhaps other groups as well, developed between Samaria and Yehud, despite their sharing of the Pentateuch. Several factors may have contributed to this historical, separate process. Among them one

may mention a) matters of provincial boundaries, b) Persian policies, c) an internal and external sense of socio-political continuity—Samaria and Judah were always two different polities, and were perceived as such but other groups, and d) the question of Jerusalem's uniqueness within Judah, but not beyond its borders. But the matter is for another talk.