

## Chapter Four: “The Babylonian Captivity” and its Consequences

The sovereignty that the kingdom of Judah enjoyed after the death of Ashurbanipal was brief. The Assyrian cities were sacked and burned by Median raiders, Assur falling in 614 and Nineveh in 612 BC, and in place of the Assyrian empire arose a Chaldaean empire based in Babylon. This Chaldaean or Neo-Babylonian empire appropriated most of what the Assyrians had once ruled, and in 605 BC Judah submitted to Nebuchadnezzar, the Chaldaean king of Babylon. Eight years later the king of Judah, foolishly relying on support promised from Egypt, refused to pay tribute to the Chaldeans and as punishment was hauled off to Babylon, his throne given to his uncle, whom the Chaldeans thought would be a more reliable vassal. Uncle Zedekiah, alas, was no wiser than his nephew, and when he revolted in 588 BC the Chaldeans took more extreme measures. In 587 BC Nebuchadnezzar besieged and took Jerusalem, allowed his troops to plunder parts of it, razed to the ground the temple that had stood for almost four hundred years, abolished the kingdom of Judah, and carried several thousand inhabitants of Jerusalem off to destinations east of the Euphrates river. Thus began what is popularly known as “the Babylonian Captivity.” Although we can see the “captivity” as a direct result of poor judgement by King Zedekiah, the Chronicler (36:14-17) explained it, as he explained all misfortunes, as Yahweh’s punishment for improper worship, this time Zedekiah’s and the chief priest’s having introduced unspecified gentile rites in the ceremonies at the Jerusalem temple.

Only a small fraction of the people of Judah were deported to the east. Jeremiah 52:28-30 says that 4600 men were deported, and if that figure is correct we may suppose that the total number of deportees - men, women and children - may have been about 20,000. The population of Judah at the time was somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000, and so at least 80% and possibly 90% of the population would have remained in Judah. Those who were deported, however, were the “best” people in the land: what was left of the royal family and the court, the professional soldiers, the priests, the most accomplished artisans, and probably the wealthy and literate members of the general population.

Mesopotamia was a foreign land, but it was not a bad place to live. The inhabitants spoke Aramaic, the same language that most Judahites had been speaking for some time (Hebrew, or “the language of Canaan,” was by the sixth century BC no longer so useful as Aramaic). In the irrigated stretches of central and southern Mesopotamia, and even in the Habur drainage area in the northwest, an industrious family could produce more food than could its counterpart in Judah. Once they had been brought across the Euphrates the captives were evidently dispersed to cities and towns all along the Euphrates and Tigris river valleys, and were given plots of land on which to make their livelihood. Jeremiah 29:4-7 counseled the deportees to build houses and plant gardens, to marry and beget children, and to pray for the peace and welfare of Babylon. The Judahites in Mesopotamia did just that, and flourished beyond anyone’s wildest dreams.

It need hardly be said that neither in Mesopotamia nor in Judah itself were Judahites in any position to heed the Deuteronomist’s instructions to slay those who worshiped gods other than Yahweh. Such fanaticism had been practicable only in the brief period of Judahite sovereignty, between 626 and 605 BC. Now, with the Judahite kingdom gone and Judahites everywhere under Babylonian control, sanity required a decent respect for Marduk, Nabu, Ishtar

and the other great image gods that Nebuchadnezzar worshiped. The Judahites resident in Mesopotamia made no effort to attack the image gods, and when a Judahite defected from the community and joined in the worship of the idols the only punishment he or she received from the Judahite community was exclusion from the worship of Adonai. As we shall see, however, there were few such defections.

### **The centrality of sacred texts and of the *torah* for the Judahites of Mesopotamia**

It was in Mesopotamia that the religion of the Judahites became something akin to what we would recognize as Judaism. Almost all of the deportees were devout worshippers of Yahweh, or Adonai (“My Lord”) as he was now increasingly called, and continued to suppose that he would bless them if they behaved better than they had in the past. Their worship of Yahweh remained fervent, but they could no longer worship him in the traditional way. They were all agreed that only at the Jerusalem temple were sacrifices pleasing to the Lord, and so their worship in “Babylonia” could include no sacrifice. Without a temple, the priests of Yahweh had no traditional priestly duties. They remained, however, the custodians of the sacred implements and of the texts that they had brought with them from the Jerusalem temple. These texts included many of the Psalms and a rudimentary version of “the Law of Moses,” the traditional law-code that had recently been reworked by the Deuteronomist. Deuteronomy, along with a briefer version of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, was known as the *torah*, which functionally can be translated as “law” but etymologically meant “teaching.” Here were prescribed the main lines of the Judahites’ criminal and civil law: the law of divorce, inheritance, damages, personal injury and much else. When a legal dispute arose among Judahites in Mesopotamia it was adjudicated according to “the Law of Moses,” and not the customary laws of the Babylonians. More important for the history of religion were those commandments in the *torah* that specified how Adonai was to be worshiped, and that absolutely forbade the worship of any other god. Finally, among the texts brought from Jerusalem to Mesopotamia were a series of historical books, the prototypes of the books from Joshua through Kings. These were not so sacred as the *torah*, and in Mesopotamia the writer whom scholars call the Deuteronomic Historian continued to work on the history, bringing it up to date and inserting references - many of them awkward - to Judah (Judah scarcely appears in the Book of Joshua and had played only a peripheral role in the earlier version of Genesis-II Kings).

The *torah* obviously included a great many rules specifying how the priests were to maintain the purity of the sacrificial cult, but these were no longer useful since sacrifice to Adonai was permitted only at the Jerusalem temple. Fortunately, the *torah* also provided many instructions for the worshipers, or the laity. Here “Moses” commanded circumcision, the celebration of holy days, the observance of every seventh day (the Sabbath) as a day of rest, abstention from the flesh of swine and other “unclean” animals, and much else. The same text prohibited a Judahite from worshiping any god but the Lord, from partaking of sacrificial food offered to “graven images” (cult statues), and from marrying a gentile. All of these laws - criminal, civil, ritual - made up the *torah*. In Mesopotamia the priests of the Lord were replaced by the “scribes” of the Lord, the *soferim*. A *sofer* studied the texts and so became an expert on the *torah*, the person who could tell you what the Lord demanded and what he forbade. It may in fact not be an exaggeration to say that whereas in Judah the center of worship had been provided by the temple and by the presence of Yahweh himself, for the Judahites of Mesopotamia the

center was the library of religious texts and the *torah*. If we look for the time and place in which Judahites began to focus their attention on “scripture” or on “sacred texts” we will find none more likely than Mesopotamia in the sixth and fifth centuries BC.

The Deuteronomist’s *torah*, written out just a generation or two before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, of course had much to say about sacrifice to Yahweh and about temple ritual. For the Judahites in Mesopotamia the old sacrificial pieties were no longer possible, and the question therefore arose, How are we now - in these strange places and new circumstances - to keep our covenant with Adonai? In place of sacrifice and temple ritual the scribes (*soferim*) underlined those portions of their sacred books that stipulated what ordinary individuals should and should not do. Most of the Ten Commandments were not especially relevant here: of course Judahites were warned not to steal, to murder, or to commit adultery, but those prohibitions seemed to apply as much to gentiles as to Judahites. Of Adonai’s commandments that applied specifically to Judahites the most obvious were to keep the Sabbath, to circumcise all baby boys, to abstain from “unclean” foods, and of course to worship no god but Adonai. The scribes supplemented the explicit commands of the Deuteronomist’s *torah* with much advice and instruction. This “oral *torah*” guided pious Judahites along a course that was guaranteed to keep them from coming anywhere close to breaking the written *torah*. The scribes combed all of their sacred books, searching for *halakhoth* and producing them from even the most unpromising text. The Hebrew verb *halakh* meant “to walk,” and a *halakhah* (singular) was therefore literally “a walking,” but more abstractly denoted “conduct.” The *halakhoth* included especially prayer, ritual washings, diet, and clothing, but touched on virtually all aspects of daily life.

The importance of obedience to the *torah* among Judahites of Mesopotamia is shown clearly in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Both of these men were born in Mesopotamia and spent most of their lives there, but in the prime of life were appointed by the Persian king to undertake a mission from Mesopotamia to Judaea. Ezra was a *sofer*, a “scribe learned in the *torah* of the Lord,” and perhaps in the year 398 (or possibly as early as 458 BC) he brought from Babylonia to Jerusalem - with a royal military escort - a great load of treasures that had been taken from the Jerusalem temple by Nebuchadnezzar. These were now being returned, as a goodwill gesture by the Persian king, for deposit in the rebuilt temple. In addition to the gold and silver, however, Ezra also brought with him from Babylonia copies of the sacred books, the *torah*. Ezra was appalled to find that in Yehud (Judah) the *torah* was largely unknown or ignored, in sharp contrast to the diligence with which Mesopotamian Judahites kept the Law. Most distressing for Ezra and an abomination to Adonai were the many “mixed marriages” in Judah, unions of Judahite men with gentile wives. These marriages Ezra forthwith dissolved. Then, to set them straight Ezra summoned all the people of Yehud to the Water Gate of Jerusalem for a reading of the *torah*. Bilingual experts were dispersed among the crowd to explain in Aramaic for those around them what the Hebrew texts stipulated.

Because it was in Mesopotamia that the *torah* first became central for Judahites, the Mesopotamian legacy to Pharisaic and Rabbinic Judaism was enormous, but the legacy did not end with Ezra and Nehemiah. Late in the first century BC, Hillel came from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem and established there the Beth Hillel (“House of Hillel”) for instruction in the written and oral *torah*. The first attempts to establish and canonize the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch were made in Mesopotamia at or shortly before Hillel’s time, and meticulous study of both the

Law and the Prophets continued there all through antiquity. The Babylonian Talmud, completed ca. 500 CE, was in fact the culmination of more than a thousand years of Judaism in this “strange land.”

### **The worship of Adonai in Mesopotamia, and the first religious community**

While the individual’s obedience to the *torah* was important for the Judahites of Mesopotamia, the communal aspects of worshipping their Lord were more enjoyable. Because he or she was obliged to refrain from labor on the Sabbath, a Judahite deported to a Mesopotamian city would on the Sabbath morning join the other Judahites in the city in order to praise the Lord, to pray, and to hear the scribes explain what Moses had written in the sacred books. The comfort derived from the worship itself was greatly augmented by the social bonds that quickly developed among the few dozen families that gathered, week after week and season after season. A new and wonderful community was forming, the *congregation*. No synagogues were built so early as the sixth century BC, but Judahites must have found places - possibly in the open air but more likely in buildings - where the congregation could regularly assemble to worship Adonai.

In these weekly assemblies music played a very important role. Many of the 150 psalms in the Psalter had already been composed, a few of them having been sung as early as the tenth and ninth centuries. These were all in Hebrew, of course, and even though Hebrew was no longer used as a spoken language it continued to be the language in which one sang to the Lord. Parallelism rather than meter had always been the basis of Semitic poetry, and the parallel verses of the psalms were sung antiphonally, half of the assembly singing the first verse and the other half responding with a parallel verse.

The Lord is my shepherd, ..... *I shall not want.*  
He maketh me to lie down in  
green pastures..... *He leadeth me beside the still waters*  
(Psalm 23:1-2 AV)

Do not strive to outdo the evildoers..... *Or emulate those who do wrong*  
For like grass they soon wither, ..... *And fade like the green of spring*  
(Psalm 37:1-2 NEB)

The Lord of Hosts is with us, ..... *The God of Jacob is our refuge*  
(Psalm 46:11 AV)

These old and beloved psalms were sung to the accompaniment of harps or smaller stringed instruments. The beauty of their language, the poetic diction, and the music of the instruments that accompanied them made the psalms a source of continual joy and comfort. And the imagery that the poetic imagination contrived could transport both singers and listeners from this mundane world to the sublime. Here, for example, is how Psalm 18 describes Adonai, anthropomorphic as ever and responding in wrath when one of his worshipers is beset by enemies and calls upon him for help:

The earth heaved and quaked,  
the foundations of the mountains shook;

they heaved, because he was angry.  
Smoke rose from his nostrils,  
devouring fire came out of his mouth,  
glowing coals and searing heat.  
He swept the skies aside as he descended,  
thick darkness lay under his feet.  
He rode on a cherub, he flew through the air;  
he swooped on the wings of the wind.  
He made darkness around him his hiding-place  
and dense vapour his canopy.  
Thick clouds came out of the radiance before him,  
hailstones and glowing coals.  
The Lord thundered from the heavens  
and the voice of the Most High spoke out.  
He loosed his arrows, he sped them far and wide,  
he shot forth lightning shafts and sent them echoing.  
The channels of the sea-bed were revealed,  
the foundations of earth laid bare  
at the Lord's rebuke,  
at the blast of the breath of his nostrils.  
He reached down from the height and took me,  
and drew me out of the mighty waters. (Psalm 18:6-16)

What sculptor or painter could match the drama and exhilaration that these word-pictures produce in the imagination?

The kind of worship that necessity had forced upon the Judahites deported to Mesopotamia was without precedent anywhere in the ancient world. Worship throughout the Near East, including Judah, had always featured sacrifice and the "divine presence," whether the divinity was a statue in a temple or an aniconic god who came down to a high place from the skies or a mountaintop. For the Judahite assemblies in Mesopotamia there was no possibility of the Lord being present - the only place in which he was present was Mt. Zion - and so for them he became entirely a celestial god, the Lord of Heaven. Because sacrifices to Adonai were permitted only at Jerusalem, the deportees elaborated a devotional worship that consisted of prayers, instruction from a *sofer*, and song. This was a religion with wings!

And the community that worshiped the Lord in Mesopotamia was also without precedent. However dispersed they were in Mesopotamia, however much they blended in with the local population in appearance and language, and however integrated they may have been in the local economies, the deported Judahites were bound to each other by their religious beliefs and practices. They were therefore the first *religious community* that the ancient world had seen, thinly spread over the whole of Mesopotamia. Every ancient territorial community had its civic religion, but in a Greek city-state or an Egyptian nome religion was merely one aspect of a community that was also bound together by economic, social, political and often military institutions. The Judahites of Mesopotamia, on the other hand, were a tiny minority in each city or town in which they had been planted, and the one thing that united them in the local

community and throughout the Tigris and Euphrates valleys was their religion. And that religion was also the one thing that separated a Judahite congregation from the rest of the people in the city or town.

The disadvantages of the Judahites' situation were outweighed by the advantages. It is true that they were prevented by their religion from participating in the cultic life of the Mesopotamian cities. It was depressing to stay home when almost everyone else turned out for "Marduk's Day" on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of the month Adar, and so the Judahites invented the "Feast of Purim" to coincide precisely with the gentiles' holiday. But the sacrificial cults were beginning to lose their appeal, and even the Mesopotamians were beginning to pay less respect to their big and beautiful statues than to the celestial gods who were - according to the astrologers - responsible for everything that happened on earth. Not being able to join the gentiles in their cultic celebrations was therefore not an intolerable deprivation. More importantly, the closeness of the Judahite community, both at the local congregational level and throughout Mesopotamia, was an immensely attractive feature. If you lived at Nippur on the lower Euphrates and needed to journey to Harran, 400 miles upstream, you would know that on reaching Harran you would seek out the Judahites of the city. They would give you lodging, guidance and other help, just as you would do for them if they were required to visit Nippur. Mesopotamian Judaism, in the first instance a religious community, obviously also provided social and even economic benefits. It should therefore be no surprise to find that the Judahite community in Mesopotamia not only survived but grew remarkably.

## **The growth of Judaism in Mesopotamia**

In the first fifty years after their arrival the Judahites probably attracted few converts, as Marduk and the other Mesopotamian image gods presided over the sprawling Chaldaean empire. A goodly amount of the annual revenues that poured into Babylon were channeled by Nebuchadnezzar to Esagila, the sacred precinct of Marduk, which became the largest and most splendid temple *temenos* the world had ever seen. A Judahite who walked past Esagila in the 550s BC and reflected on the immense power of the Chaldaean kings would probably have conceded that Marduk was indeed a god without parallel. But things changed dramatically in 539 BC. In that year Cyrus the Persian attacked Nabonidus the Chaldaean and defeated him. Nabonidus was unpopular in Babylon because he had neglected Marduk and Nabu in favor of the moon god, and the inhabitants of Babylon seem to have welcomed Cyrus into their city. Cyrus promised to respect Esagila and all the other Babylonian cult centers, and indeed he did, but it was well known that these were not Cyrus's gods. The Persian gods were all aniconic, and although we do not know Cyrus's own theological views we do know that during his lifetime many of the leading Persians were accepting Ahura Mazda as their one great "God of Heaven."

If we put ourselves in the sandals of Judahites living in or near Babylon in 539 BC, we can understand how vindicated they must have felt when the Chaldaean empire fell to Cyrus, and when the great image gods of Mesopotamia proved inferior to the aniconic god of the Persians. The gods of the Persians and Judahites were just as much products of the human imagination as were the gods of the Babylonians, but were created by priests, prophets and poets rather than by woodcarvers and sculptors. Ahura Mazda and Adonai thus had the enormous advantage of being invisible while the Babylonian gods were material. Deutero-Isaiah, hailing Cyrus as "the Lord's

anointed,” made himself merry by poking fun at Marduk and Nabu, these once towering gods now shown to be nothing but the handiwork of a woodcarver. Cyrus himself was deferential to the old image gods, because he wanted to endear himself to the Mesopotamians, and through the reign of Darius (521-486 BC) Esagila and the other cult places seem to have remained intact. They were no longer, however, the recipients of the imperial largesse that had come their way when the Chaldeans ruled the world, and deterioration must have been visible in the ceremonies as well as in the dedications. Disaster befell Esagila in the early 470s BC. When they learned of the annihilation of a Persian army in Greece in 479 BC, the Babylonians believed - perhaps with encouragement from the priests of Marduk - that the time was ripe for a revolt against Xerxes, whose religious policies in Mesopotamia were less benevolent than those of Darius. The revolt failed, of course, and as punishment Xerxes ordered that much of Esagila be demolished, and for all we know the great cult statues of Marduk and Nabu may have been hauled away to Persia. How had the mighty idols fallen, and how great the Lord of Heaven had shown himself to be! Judahites undoubtedly debated whether their Lord was the same as Ahura Mazda, the God of Heaven whom Xerxes worshiped, and it may have been in Mesopotamia that monolatrists began to think monotheistically.

As the image gods lost their majesty, some Mesopotamians became curious about the aniconic religion of the Judahites. In the sixth century BC the number of Mesopotamian conversions was perhaps not very large, but in the reign of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC) they must have increased dramatically. The most informative archive of cuneiform tablets that survives from the second half of the fifth century BC shows that at Nippur, sixty miles south of Babylon, a significant minority of the population had Judahite names. The tablets in the archive were kept by the “Murashu Firm,” a family company that leased royal land to individuals who lived in Nippur or close by. Of all the people who held leases on royal land from 455 to 403 BC, 8% had Judahite names. This is, frankly, amazing. When the deportees from Judah (20,000 men, women and children?) first arrived in Mesopotamia, in 587 BC, they would have accounted for considerably less than 1% of the population. A century and a half later the Judahite congregations had increased well over tenfold. And that despite the “return of the exiles” to Judah that the Persian kings permitted and even subsidized! Such dramatic growth of Judahite congregations east of the Euphrates could not have occurred unless in the meantime Mesopotamians had become Judahites by the tens of thousands.

In fact it was in Mesopotamia that the term *Judahite*, or *Judaeen*, came into use. Before 587 BC the term was “men of Judah” or “people of Judah,” but because the deportees and their descendants were now “of Mesopotamia” rather than “of Judah,” a new ethnonym was required. Accordingly, the noun *y<sup>e</sup>hudi* (plural: *y<sup>e</sup>hudim*) was coined, perhaps in the fifth or fourth century BC. A new verb *yahad* also came into use at this time: “to become a Judahite,” or, as we would say, “to convert to Judaism.” For a Babylonian man to become a Judahite was not something to be done lightly, because it required him to be circumcised (in Mesopotamia, unlike the Levant, infant boys were not circumcised). Men and women alike would need to follow the dietary laws of the *torah* when they joined a Judahite congregation, they would no longer be permitted to work on the Sabbath, and of course they would henceforth not participate in the holidays for the image gods that the rest of the city celebrated. Despite these handicaps, the attractions of Judahite monolatry and of the Judahite community prevailed. By the first century CE hundreds of thousands of Mesopotamians identified themselves as *y<sup>e</sup>hudim*, and by Late Antiquity the

number may have been close to two million.

Both in its religious innovations and in its numbers Mesopotamian Judaism was one of the ancient world's most dramatic but least noticed success stories.