

## 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. Although we can see Nebuchadnezzar's harsh measures 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 Gentile rites into the ceremonies at the Jerusalem temple.

Thus began what is popularly and sadly known as "the Babylonian Captivity,"<sup>1</sup> but what can more accurately and cheerfully be termed the beginning of Judaism in Mesopotamia. This was a chapter of immense importance in the history of religion. Unfortunately, not much is known about it and what little has been pieced together is widely ignored. We may nevertheless say that for well over a thousand years Mesopotamia was at the heart of Judaism. From the first century until the end of antiquity many more Judaeans lived in Mesopotamia than lived in Judaea. And it was in Mesopotamia that rabbinic scholars produced the "Babylonian" Talmud, which has been normative for rabbinic Judaism ever since.

Jewish interest in history has regularly been focused on Judaea and Jerusalem. The Tanakh was mostly composed there, and the only books of the Hebrew Bible that deal with Judaism in Mesopotamia are late and mythical: Daniel and Esther. Except for two episodes in the first century CE, the twenty books of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* ignore the Judaeans of Mesopotamia. The Babylonian Talmud and other rabbinic sources illuminate something of the period 200-500 CE, but they consist mostly of debates about the oral Torah and say little about Judaeans or Judaism outside the rabbinic academies. As a result, in modern histories of Judaism the Judaeans of Mesopotamia between the sixth century BC and the third century CE play a very marginal role.<sup>2</sup>

#### The captivity

Only a small fraction of the people of Judah were deported to the east by Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah says that 4600 men were deported,<sup>3</sup> 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 counseled the deportees to build houses and plant gardens, to marry and beget children, and to pray for the peace and welfare of Babylon.<sup>4</sup> 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, Leviticus 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 between 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 perhaps 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 worshiping 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 NEB)

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 and only 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 small and open to remedy. Judahites were prevented by their monolatry from participating in the cultic life of the Mesopotamian cities. It was depressing to stay at 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 - to celebrate Marduk and Ishtar, the greatest god and goddess in the pantheon. The Judahites countered by inventing the "Feast of Purim," to coincide precisely with the Gentile holiday. They celebrated not Marduk and Ishtar but

Mardochai (Μαρδοχαῖος in the Septuagint) and Esther, the hero and heroine of an aetiological tale. The Book of Esther was composed in Mesopotamia in the fourth or third century BC to provide an excuse for the new holiday, and to defend it against detractors in Judaea itself, where neither the holiday nor the book was given much respect until the second or third century CE.<sup>5</sup>

In Mesopotamia, as in many other places, sacrificial cults were beginning to lose their appeal. The Mesopotamians were beginning to pay less attention 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 for worshippers of Adonai. 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 end of the Chaldaean empire and its effect on Judaism**

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 was 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 Sin, 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 aniconic, and although we do not know Cyrus's own theological views we do know that many of the leading Persians worshiped 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. As we shall see in more detail below,

Deutero-Isaiah hailed Cyrus as “the Lord’s anointed,” and 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. Worse misfortune 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 - evidently 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 Cyrus and Darius. The revolt failed, and as punishment Xerxes ordered that parts 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! The joy of the Judahites in Mesopotamia is reflected in what they wrote after the disgrace of Babylon.<sup>6</sup>

### **The incipient monotheism of Deutero-Isaiah**

An eloquent prophet of Adonai in Mesopotamia composed his oracles in the late sixth century BC. The prophet hailed Cyrus of Persia as “the anointed (*mashiach*) of Adonai,” and so can be dated after Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC and put an end to the Chaldean empire. The name of the prophet has not survived, but his poetic prophecy has. The prophet intended it to be attached to the much older collection of prophecies attributed to Isaiah,<sup>7</sup> and so it was. Specifically, Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah are the words of the anonymous prophet, who is conventionally known as Deutero-Isaiah (“Second Isaiah”). Many scholars have seen Deutero-Isaiah as the first monotheistic voice in the Hebrew Bible.

Joyful at the triumph of Cyrus and at the humiliation of the image gods - especially Nabu and Marduk - worshiped by the Babylonians, Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed that not only these particular statues but all cult statues were nothing more than the handiwork of craftsmen:

Those who put their trust in an image,  
and say to idols, “You are our gods,”  
will be repulsed in bitter shame. (42:17, OSB)

The credibility of the prophet’s aniconic god rose as the image gods were unmasked:

What likeness, then, will you find for God  
or what form to resemble him?  
An image which a craftsman makes  
and a goldsmith overlays with gold  
and fits with studs of silver?  
Or should someone choose mulberry wood,  
a wood that does not rot,  
and seek out a skillful craftsman for the task  
of setting up an image and making it secure? (40:18-20, OSB)

Most worshipers of Adonai had all along denounced the worship of “idols,” but doubts had set in during the Assyrian and Chaldaean domination. For three hundred years it appeared that the great image gods - Ashur, first, and then Marduk and Nabu - did indeed rule the world. In 539 BC, however, Marduk and the other idols suddenly lost their empire, and the world lay at the feet of Cyrus the Persian, who worshiped no idols. The god or gods worshiped by Cyrus had no statues, but Cyrus was too much a diplomat (or too eager to win the support of the Babylonians) to call attention to the foolishness of idolatry. Deutero-Isaiah had no such qualms, and was one of the first to see and to say clearly that the days of idolatry were numbered.<sup>8</sup> A generation before Xenophanes and Herakleitos ridiculed the Hellenes’ worship of cult statues, Deutero-Isaiah pointed out how nonsensical it was to shape a god out of wood and metal, and then to worship it. Of course Deutero-Isaiah could not see that his own god (or Cyrus’s) was just as much a human creation as were the idols, and that his own eloquent poetry was giving shape and substance to Adonai just as the woodworkers and smiths had created the statue of Marduk. But that the idols in their temples were shams, Deutero-Isaiah knew very well.

Deutero-Isaiah put special emphasis on the ability of Adonai to predict the future. The Babylonian priests were past masters of divination, but Nabu, Marduk and the other gods had failed to see what was coming. Only Adonai had got it right. Specifically, as Mark Smith has argued, Deutero-Isaiah seems to have had in mind the oracles of Isaiah 13:2-14:23, which - as Deutero-Isaiah saw them - had predicted the fall and desolation of Babylon at the hand of the Medes.<sup>9</sup> Now, in 539 BC, the word of the Lord had been fulfilled: Cyrus had conquered Babylon and had put an end to the Chaldaean empire. Deutero-Isaiah accordingly makes Adonai boast of his ability to foretell the future:

Thus says the Lord, Israel’s King,  
The Lord of Hosts, his Redeemer:  
I am the first and I am the last,  
and there is no god but me.  
Who is like me? Let him speak up;  
let him declare his proof and set it out for me:  
let him announce beforehand things to come,  
let him foretell what is yet to be.  
Take heart, have no fear.  
Did I not tell you this long ago?  
I foretold it, and you are my witnesses.  
Is there any god apart from me,  
any other deity? I know none (44:6-8 OSB)

In fact, the events of 539 BC did not quite match the prophecies in Isaiah 13-14, which had been made some sixty years earlier. The prophecies threatened Babylon with the same fate that the great cities of Assyria had just suffered at the hands of the Medes: Assur had been sacked and burned in 614, Kalakh in 613, and Nineveh in 612 BC. All of the inhabitants of the three Assyrian cities had been slaughtered or enslaved by the Medes, all of the cities’ wealth had been hauled away, and the cities were then razed to the ground. At Isaiah 13 Adonai announces that he will impose the same fate upon the people of Babylon and their city:

I shall stir up the Medes against them:  
they cannot be bought off with silver,  
nor be tempted by gold;  
they have no pity on little children  
and spare no mother's son.  
Babylon, fairest of kingdoms,  
proud beauty of the Chaldeans,  
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah  
when overthrown by God.  
Never again will she be inhabited,  
no one will live in her throughout the ages;  
no Arab will pitch his tent there,  
no shepherds fold their flocks.  
But marmots will have their lairs in her,  
and porcupines will overrun her houses;  
desert-owls will dwell there,  
and there he-goats will gambol;  
jackals will occupy her mansions,  
and wolves her luxurious palaces.  
Her time draws very near;  
her days have not long to run (Isaiah 13:17-22 OSB)

The terrible fate prophesied for Babylon was not what happened to the city in 539 BC. Babylon was taken not by the savage Medes but by the relatively civilized Persians. Cyrus dealt kindly with the Babylonians, who welcomed him into the city with palm branches. Neither little children nor their parents were slaughtered. Throughout the two hundred years of Persian domination Babylon continued to be one of the great cities of the ancient world, and served as the winter capital of the Persian empire.

Although the city of Babylon suffered little damage in 539 BC, the Babylonians did lose their empire to Cyrus, and tribute from the Fertile Crescent no longer poured into the great temple of Marduk. The mighty had fallen, and that was enough for Deutero-Isaiah to celebrate Adonai as the only god who could foretell the future. More than that, the prophet wrote out for Adonai declarations that he was the only god in existence:

Before me no god existed,  
nor will there be any after me. I am the Lord...(OSB 43:10-11; literally, "I am Yahweh")

The prophet used his great poetic skill to contrast the impotence of the statues with the limitless power of Adonai:

Who has measured the waters of the sea in the hollow of his hand,  
or with its span gauged the heavens?  
Who has held all the soil of the earth in a bushel,  
or weighed the mountains on a balance,

the hills on a pair of scales? (40:12)

Other gifted poets had hymned the power of other gods. In the epic *Enuma Elish*, which for a thousand years had been sung at every New Year's festival in Babylon, a great Bronze Age poet had described Marduk's creation of the heavens and the earth. But now Marduk was humiliated, and suddenly the Akkadian *Enuma Elish* was less credible than the Hebrew Genesis. Deutero-Isaiah has Adonai repeat his monotheist rhetoric:

I am the Lord (*or*, I am Yahweh), and there is none other;  
apart from me there is no god (45:5 OSB)

And again:

I am the Lord (*or*, I am Yahweh), and there is none other (45:18 OSB)

And again and again, throughout the sixteen chapters of the prophet's text.

Although Deutero-Isaiah was indeed a monotheist,<sup>10</sup> his monotheism was considerably less developed than that expressed by Philo Judaeus, five hundred years later, or in the New Testament. In the polytheistic world of the sixth century BC, every kingdom had its own god or gods. Each patron god was supposed to look after the kingdom or people that worshiped him, and everybody therefore had at least one god. What Deutero-Isaiah discovered is that the gods of Babylon and the other Mesopotamian cities were not gods at all. The Gentiles, all of whom had supposed that they were sustained and protected by their gods, were now seen by Deutero-Isaiah to be god-less. The gods of "the nations" were not gods but empty idols, and only Yahweh Sabaoth was real.

The prophet did not conceive of his god as God, the Heavenly Father of all humankind. As the prophet saw him, Adonai was still nothing more than the god of Israel, with a correspondingly limited set of concerns and responsibilities. Whatever Adonai has done - bringing down one empire and setting up another - he has done for the sake of Israel.

But now, Jacob, this is the word of the Lord,  
the word of your Creator,  
of him who fashioned you, Israel.  
Have no fear, for I have redeemed you:  
I call you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through water, I shall be with you;  
when you pass through rivers they will not overwhelm you;  
walk through fire, and you will not be scorched,  
through flames, and they will not burn you.  
I am the Lord, your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer.  
I give Egypt as ransom for you,  
Nubia and Seba in exchange for you.  
You are more precious to me than the Assyrians;

you are honoured and I love you.  
I would give the Edomites in exchange for you,  
and any other people for your life (43:1-4, OSB)

In Deutero-Isaiah's metaphor, Adonai is the shepherd, and the people of Israel are his flock. All other people - all the Gentiles - are sheep without a shepherd. This was a polemical or negative sort of monotheism. In a Tennessee schoolyard the taunt would have been, "My god is real, and y'all's gods are fakes!" The prophet did not yet see that if only his god was real, then his god belonged to everybody: if indeed there was only one shepherd, then all the sheep were his.

Not until the third century BC, when Judaeon monolatry collided with Greek polytheism and combined with Greek philosophy, did a few Judaeans begin the task of refashioning Adonai from the god of Israel into God. And not until the advent of New Covenant Christianity, which aimed to bring God to all the Gentiles, were the social implications of monotheism realized. Nevertheless, the limited monotheism of Deutero-Isaiah was an important step in the transition from polytheism to monotheism. It made the worship of Adonai all the more attractive to the Mesopotamians, many of whom sought to become Judahites and so to come under the protection of the god of Israel, the only god whose credentials had improved while those of the image gods had been badly tarnished.

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

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 quite small, but in the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I (465-424 BC) conversions 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, approximately eight per cent had Judahite names.<sup>11</sup> 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 one per cent of the Mesopotamian population. A century and a half later the Judahite congregations had increased well over tenfold. This growth occurred despite the "return of the exiles" to Judah that the Persian kings had not only permitted but even subsidized. Such dramatic growth could not have occurred unless tens of thousands of Mesopotamians had in the meantime become Judaeans. Although some descendants of "captive" Judaeans did return from Mesopotamia to Judah under the Persian kings, the great majority of Judaeans in Mesopotamia obviously stayed where they were.

In fact it was in Mesopotamia that the term "Judaeon" 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 Mesopotamians rather than inhabitants 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 Judaeon," or, as we would

say, “to convert to Judaism.” For a Babylonian man to become a Judaeen 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 Judaeen 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 Judaeen monolatry and of the Judaeen community prevailed.

From the sixth century BC to at least the second century CE, the expansion of Judaism in Mesopotamia was remarkable. From the second century onward Judaism had to compete with Christianity, and then with Mazdaism and Manichaeism, and its growth slowed. Nevertheless, Judaism remained vigorous in Mesopotamia. It was there that two of the most important rabbinic academies were located - in the cities of Sura and Pumbeditha - and that the “Babylonian” Talmud was compiled. It has recently been argued that in late third- and early fourth-century Mesopotamia at least four smaller rabbinic academies were also functioning.<sup>12</sup> How many Mesopotamians were Judaeen by the end of antiquity is not known, but a reasonable guess is that the number was somewhere between one and two million, or at least twenty per cent of the overall population.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the Judaeens of Mesopotamia fully embraced the corporate ideology of Judaism. Despite the fact that most of them were descendants of proselytes, they proudly described themselves as “exiles” from Judaea, and their spokesman and nominal leader was given the title *exilarch* by the Parthian and Sassanid kings.

### **Judaean political power in Babylonia and Adiabene**

Early in the first century CE, thanks to their large following, two Judaeen brothers became the de facto satraps of southern Mesopotamia, or Babylonia, and formal vassals of the Parthian king.<sup>14</sup> Anileus and Asineus were Judaeen natives of Nehardea, a sizeable city on the middle Euphrates river and not far from the present city of Fallujah. Already in the first century most of the people living in Nehardea were Judaeen, and the city served as the collection point for the half-shekel “temple tax” that every adult Judaeen male in Babylonia sent annually to the Jerusalem temple (the city of Nisibis was the corresponding collection point for Judaeens living in the Jezirah of northern Mesopotamia).<sup>15</sup> According to Josephus’ always dubious testimony, “many tens of thousands” of Judaeens conveyed the annual temple tax from Nehardea to Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup>

The brothers Anileus and Asineus began as gang-leaders who robbed travelers on the open roads, but as their Judaeen gang became a guerilla force and eventually an army, the brothers were formally recognized by Artabanos III - king of the Parthians - as his vassals in charge of Babylonia. Anileus’ rule (Asineus died early, supposedly poisoned by Anileus’ wife) lasted from about 20 to 35 CE, by which time it was resented by most of the land’s Gentiles. The end came when Anileus went to war with Mithridates, one of the many sons-in-law of Artabanos III. In the battle a great many (“tens of thousands,” says Josephus) of Anileus’ men were killed by the Parthians, as was Anileus himself, and the battlefield defeat was followed by violence of Gentiles against Judaeens throughout Babylonia.

Far to the north, a less spectacular but more durable state ruled by Judaeens was Adiabene

(Αδιαβηνή). This was the land along the left bank of the Tigris between two of its main tributaries, the Great Zab and the Little Zab rivers. Here was where Nineveh had once stood, and where Alexander the Great had won his decisive victory at Gaugamela. The local dynasty of Adiabene was in vassalage to the Parthian empire, but in internal affairs was free to do as it wished. In the first century CE the dynasty converted to Judaism, an event which Josephus described in great detail.<sup>17</sup> The queen mother, Helenē, Judaized along with her son, King Izates, and apparently the entire royal family followed suit. Izates ruled until his death in 58, and three months later his mother died (of a broken heart, it was said). Izates' brother, Monobazos II, saw to it that the bones were carried to Jerusalem, where they were interred in large and ornate tombs just outside the city walls. Helenē's was the grandest of all the tombs of Judaeen royalty.<sup>18</sup>

Josephus seems to have dated the conversion of Izates and Helenē early in Claudius' reign as Roman emperor, and in our chronology to 44 or 45 CE. The royal Judaeen family ruled Adiabene until Trajan annexed it to the Roman empire in 116 CE. Helenē and Izates are likely to have become Judaeans for religious reasons: like so many other Mesopotamians, that is, they probably found Judaism both more credible and more attractive than the cults of their native deities. Jacob Neusner, however, pointed out that the royal family might also have seen some political advantage in Izates' becoming a Judaeen king.<sup>19</sup> Although at the time Judaeans may have been a minority in Adiabene, their numbers were growing throughout Mesopotamia, and in 45 CE - immediately following the death of Herodes Agrippa - Judaeans everywhere were disappointed that no kingdom anywhere was ruled by a Judaeen king. The conversion of the royal family must have helped to spread Judaism in Adiabene. In 66, when the Judaeen revolt against Rome began, the rebels hoped for help from "their kinsmen" in Adiabene.<sup>20</sup> And when Trajan invaded Mesopotamia in 115 the Judaeans of Adiabene were a significant military force among his enemies.

## Summary

Josephus' narrative of events at Nehardea and in Adiabene illustrates the demographic changes that over the centuries Judaism had wrought in Mesopotamia. It seems that the number of Mesopotamians who identified themselves as *y<sup>e</sup>hudim* must have been in the high hundreds of thousands by the first century CE, and far higher by Late Antiquity. In its numerical expansion, its religious innovations, and its historical consequences Mesopotamian Judaism was one of the ancient world's most dramatic but least noticed success stories.

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1. For an in-depth treatment of the first century of "the Babylonian Captivity," based on cuneiform documents as well as an analysis of biblical sources, see Albertz 2003.

2. As an example, Lester Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, in two volumes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) provides a masterful survey of the primary sources and the scholarship on Judaism for this period, but in neither the primary nor the secondary material does Mesopotamian Judaism appear in any significant way. As a result, Grabbe's fine volumes deal mostly with the

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Persian province of Yehud and with Hellenistic and early Roman Judaea. Some attention is given to the Hellenistic Diaspora, but Judaeans and Judaism in Mesopotamia are all but ignored (Izates and Helena are mentioned twice, but only in connection with their contacts with Jerusalem, and Anileus and Asineus are apparently not mentioned at all). Salomon Funk, *Die Juden in Babylonien 200-500* (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1902) was for two generations the standard work on Mesopotamian Judaism. In the 1960s Funk's book was replaced by Jacob Neusner's, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, in five volumes (Leiden: Brill, 1965-1970). Inevitably, Neusner focused on the Sassanid period, and depended almost entirely on rabbinic source material, over which he had and has unparalleled control.

3. Jeremiah 52:28-30.

4. Jeremiah 29:4-7.

5. In Judaea the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar were still called the Feast of Marduk (Μαρδοχαϊκή ἡμέρα) in the late second century BC. See II Macc 15:36. Of all the books in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Esther is the only one that is not represented by fragments at Qumran, and as late as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE some rabbis in Galilee did not include the book in the Tanakh. For a provocative analysis of the Book of Esther and its consequences see now Horowitz 2006.

6. All of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) is relevant to this exultation. For the humiliation and captivity of Marduk and Nabu (Bel and Nebo) see especially 46:1-2. The destruction of Marduk's statue and temple is also celebrated in the short apocryphal story, *Daniel, Bel and the Dragon*. In that story, Daniel shows King Cyrus that the enormous quantity of food that the priests set before the statue of Bel (Marduk) every evening is not consumed by the statue during the night, but is secretly hauled away and consumed by the priests and their families. In chagrin, Cyrus allows Daniel to demolish Bel's statue and temple. This apocryphon was composed during or shortly after the Seleukid period.

7. Most of the prophecies in Isaiah 1-39 date from ca. 700 BC, but some are considerably later. Chapters 13-14 can hardly have been composed before ca. 600 BC.

8. For other passages deriding image gods see Isaiah 41:21-24; 44:9-20; 45:20-21; 46:1-7.

9. Smith 2004, pp. 229 ff. Although 14:3-21 is identified at 14:4 as "this taunt-song over the king of Babylon," the taunt-song may originally have been directed against some other enemy. It is quite general and "could have been applied to any of Israel's oppressors" (OSB, note, *ad loc.*).

10. On the larger topic of the evolution of Judaic monotheism see Smith 2001.

11. Miller and Hayes 1986, pp.431 and 433. For more detail see Michael Coogan, "Life in the Diaspora: Jews at Nippur in the Fifth Century B.C.," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37 (1974), pp. 6-12.

12. See the English abstract of the Hebrew article by Barak Cohen, "On Local Academies in Talmudic Babylonia," *Siyaywn* 70 (2005), pp. 447-471.

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13. For a guess about the size of the Judaeian population in Mesopotamia see Grant 1973, p. 275: “In that country the Jewish communities were experiencing a great efflorescence. Between AD 200 and 500 they may have increased in numbers from one million to two.” For an estimate of 860,000 in early Sassanid times see Neusner 1965, vol. 2, pp. 124 ff. Smallwood 1981, p. 415, summarizes that in the second century CE Mesopotamia was “the oldest, and possibly the largest, section of the Diaspora.”
14. On this episode see Josephus *AJ* 18.310-376. Smallwood 1981, p. 415, dates the rule of Anileus (and Asineus) to ca. 20-35 CE.
15. Nehardea was destroyed in 259 CE, possibly by Odenathus, and the rabbinic academy that had been in Nehardea for a generation was relocated to nearby Pumbeditha, which became - in Arabic - Fallujah.
16. At *AJ* 18.313 Josephus says that when the didrachma (half-shekel) donations were carried from Nehardea to Jerusalem πολλάί τε ἀνθρώπων μυριάδες escorted the money. Although this may have been a rhetorical flourish, it shows what Josephus imagined was the Jewish population of Mesopotamia.
17. Feldman 1993, p. 566, note 152, observes that “Josephus’ lengthy account is in an easy-flowing style very different from Books 17-19 of the *Antiquities*,” and he suggests that Josephus may have taken the story from some other source.
18. For the story of Helenē and Izates see Josephus *AJ* 20.17-96. The elaborate tomb, long called the “Tomb of the Kings” (it was thought to be the tomb of David and his immediate successors), is approximately one kilometer north of the Old City.
19. Jacob Neusner, “The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: a New Perspective,” *JBL* 83 (1964), pp. 60-66.
20. In the preface to the *BJ* and in Agrippa’s long speech at 2.16.4 (2.388) Josephus’ references to the Judaeans’ “kinsmen (*homophyloi*) from Adiabene” assume that the “kinsmen” there were numerous.