Those Who Remained

In the early days of archaeological research there was a notion that the Babylonian exile was nearly total and that much of the population of Judah was carried away. It was thought that Judah was emptied of its population and the countryside was left devastated. Many scholars accepted the biblical report that the entire aristocracy of Judah-the royal family, Temple priests, ministers, and prominent merchants-was carried away, and that the people who remained in Judah were only the poorest peasantry.

Now that we know more about Judah's population, this historical reconstruction has proved to be mistaken. Let us first consider the numbers involved. Second Kings 24:14 gives the number of exiles in the first Babylonian campaign (in 597 BCE in the days of Jehoiachin) at ten thousand, while verse 16 in the same chapter counts eight thousand exiles. Although the account in Kings does not provide a precise number of exiles taken away from Judah at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, it does state that after the murder of Gedaliah and the massacre of the Babylonian garrison at Mizpah "all the people" fled to Egypt (2 Kings 25:26), presumably leaving the countryside of Judah virtually deserted.

A sharply different estimate of the number of exiles is ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah—who reportedly remained with Gedaliah in Mizpah until fleeing to Egypt and would therefore have been an eyewitness to the event. The book of Jeremiah 52:28-30 reports that the total of the Babylonian deportations amounted to forty-six hundred. Though this figure is also quite round, most scholars believe it to be basically plausible, because its subtotals are quite specific and are probably more precise than the rounded numbers in 2 Kings. Yet in neither Kings nor Jeremiah do we know whether the figures represent the *total* number of deportees or just male heads of households (a system of counting quite common in the ancient world). Given these compounded uncertainties, the most that can reasonably be said is that we are dealing with a total number of exiles ranging between a few thousand and perhaps fifteen or twenty thousand at most.

When we compare this number to the total population of Judah in the late seventh century, *before* the destruction of Jerusalem, we can gain an idea of the scale of the deportations. Judah's population can be quite accurately estimated from data collected during intensive surveys and excavations at about seventy-five thousand (with Jerusalem comprising at least 20 percent of this number—fifteen thousand—with another fifteen thousand probably inhabiting its nearby agricultural hinterland). Thus even if we accept the highest possible figures for exiles (twenty thousand), it would seem that they comprised *at most* a quarter of the population of the Judahite state. That would mean that at least seventy five percent of the population remained on the land.

What do we know about this vast majority of the Judahites, who did not go into exile? Scattered references in prophetic texts suggest that they continued their agricultural way of life much as before. Mizpah, north of Jerusalem, was one of several towns that remained. The ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem were also frequented, and some sort of cultic activity continued to take place there (Jeremiah 41:5). And it should be noted that this community included not only poor villagers but also artisans, scribes, priests, and prophets. An important part of the prophetic work of the time, particularly the books of Haggai and Zechariah, was compiled in Judah.

Intensive excavations throughout Jerusalem have shown that the city was indeed systematically destroyed by the Babylonians. The conflagration seems to have been general. When activity on the ridge of the City of David resumed in the Persian period, the new suburbs on the western hill that had flourished since at least the time of Hezekiah were not reoccupied. A single sixth-century BCE burial cave found to the west of the city may

represent a family who moved to a nearby settlement but continued to bury its dead in its ancestral tomb.

Yet there is evidence of continued occupation both to the north and to the south of Jerusalem. Some measure of self-government seems to have continued at Mizpah on the plateau of Benjamin, about eight miles to the north of Jerusalem. The soon-to-be-assassinated governor who served there, Gedaliah, was probably a high official in the Judahite administration before the destruction. There are several indications (Jeremiah 37:12-13; 38:19) that the area to the north of Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonians without a fight, and archaeological evidence supports this hypothesis.

The most thorough research on the settlement of Judah in the Babylonian period, conducted by Oded Lipschits of Tel Aviv University, has shown that the site of Tell en-Nasbeh near modern Ramallah—identified as the location of biblical Mizpah—was not destroyed in the Babylonian campaign, and that it was indeed the most important settlement in the region in the sixth century BCE. Other sites north of Jerusalem such as Bethel and Gibeon continued to be inhabited in the same era. In the area to the south of Jerusalem, around Bethlehem, there seems to have been significant continuity from the late monarchic to the Babylonian period. Thus, to both the north and south of Jerusalem, life continued almost uninterrupted.

Both text and archaeology contradict the idea that between the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the return of the exiles after the proclamation of Cyrus in 538 BCE Judah was in total ruin and uninhabited. The Persian takeover and the return of a certain number of exiles who were supported by the Persian government changed the settlement situation there.

Urban life in Jerusalem began to revive and many returnees settled in the Judean hills. The lists of repatriates in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 amount to almost fifty thousand people. It is unclear whether this significant number represents the cumulative figure of the successive waves of exiles who came back over more than a hundred years, or the total population of the province of Yehud, including those who remained. In either case, archaeological research has shown that this figure is wildly exaggerated. Survey data from all the settlements in Yehud in the fifth-fourth centuries BCE yields a population of approximately thirty thousand people (on the boundaries of Yehud, see Appendix G and Figure 29). This small number constituted the post-exilic community of the time of Ezra and Nehemiah so formative in shaping later Judaism.

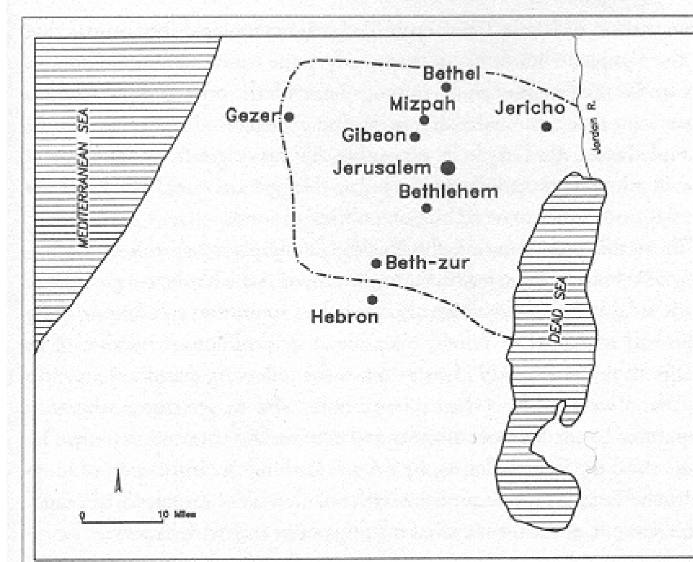

Figure 29: The province of Yehud in the Persian period.

From Kings to Priests

The edict of Cyrus the Great allowing a group of Judahite exiles to return to Jerusalem could hardly have been prompted by sympathy for the people remaining in Judah or for the suffering of the exiles. Rather, it should be seen as a well-calculated policy that aimed to serve the interests of the Persian empire. The Persians tolerated and even promoted local cults as a way to ensure the loyalty of local groups to the wider empire; both Cyrus and his son Cambyses supported the building of temples and encouraged the return of displaced populations elsewhere in their vast empire. Their policy was to grant autonomy to loyal local elites.

Many scholars agree that the Persian kings encouraged the rise of a loyal elite in Yehud, because of the province's strategic and sensitive location on the border of Egypt. This loyal elite was recruited from the Jewish exile community in Babylonia and was led by dignitaries who were closely connected to the Persian administration. They were mainly individuals of high social and economic status, families who had resisted assimilation and who were most probably close to the Deuteronomistic ideas. Though the returnees were a minority in Yehud, their religious, socioeconomic, and political status, and their concentration in and around Jerusalem, gave them power far beyond their number. They were probably also supported by the local people who were sympathetic to the Deuteronomic law code promulgated a century before. With the help of a rich collection of literature—historical compositions and prophetic works—and with the popularity of the Temple, which they controlled, the returnees were able to establish their authority over the population of the province of Yehud. What saved the day for them and made possible the future development of Judaism was the fact that (unlike the Assyrians' policy in the northern kingdom a century before) the Babylonians had not resettled vanquished Judah with foreign deportees.

But how is it that the Davidic dynasty suddenly disappeared from the scene? Why wasn't the monarchy reestablished, with a figure from the royal family as a king? According to the book of Ezra, the first two figures who led the repatriates were Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel-both are described as "governor" of Yehud (Ezra 5:14; Haggai 1:1). Sheshbazzar, the one who brought back the treasures of the old Temple and who laid the foundations of the new Temple, is an enigmatic figure. He is called "the prince of Judah" (Ezra 1:8), hence many scholars identified him with Shenazzar of 1 Chronicles 3:18, who was one of the heirs to the Davidic throne, maybe even the son of Jehoiachin. Zerubbabel, who completed the construction of the Temple in 516 BCE, also apparently came from the Davidic lineage. Yet he did not function alone, but together with the priest Jeshua. And it is significant that Zerubbabel disappears from the biblical accounts after the completion of the Temple. It is possible that his origin from the house of David stirred messianic hopes in Judah (Haggai 2:20-23), which led the Persian authorities to recall him on political grounds.

From this point onward, the Davidic family played no role in the history of Yehud. At the same time, the priesthood, which rose to a position of leadership in exile, and which also played an important role among those who had remained in Yehud, maintained its prominence because of its ability to preserve group identity. So in the following decades the people of Yehud were led by a dual system: politically, by governors who were appointed by the Persian authority and who had no connection to the Davidic royal family; religiously, by priests. Lacking the institution of kingship, the Temple now became the center of identify of the people of Yehud. This was one of the most crucial turning points in Jewish history.

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