

*ESSAY*  
*BA course year 2 no. 2*  
*"Introduction to Scripture II."*

*What was the significance of the Exile in the history of the Old Testament?*

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## 1. Preface

Please notice that the whole essay is based on German literature (mainly on books and notes from the universities of Freiburg and Mannheim). So it might happen that I use abbreviations, which are only used in German theology (e.g. (PG) for “Priesterschrift / Grundschrift”). In most cases I’ve tried to translate it into English.

## 2. General definition of “exile”

The exile in exegetical sense is comprehended as the period from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC to the rebuilding of Jerusalem under the Persians beginning in 537 BC.

The practice of removing conquered peoples on a large scale was ancient in the Near East. Deportation did not as a rule include the entire population; those who have been selected for the removal included the royal and noble families, the wealthy people, the landowners, and the skilled artisans. The peasant population generally lived the same way no matter who governed the country.

## 3. The Babylonian exile – historic background

Tiglath-Pileser III removed the inhabitants of Gilead, Galilee and Naphtali to Assyria (2 Kings 15,29: *“In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead and Galilee – the whole territory of Naphtali and deported the population to Assyria.”*) and Sargon carried Israel to Assyria and settled its people in Calah, along the Habor and the river Gozan and in the cities of the Medes (2 Kings 17,6: *“In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah on the Habor, a river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.”*).

The land was resettled by people from Babylon, Cutha, Avva, Hamath, and Sephaim. Another resettlement of foreign peoples in the land of Israel seems to be mentioned in Ezra 4,1-2: *“When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building the Temple of Yahweh, God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the heads of families and said, ‘Let us help you build, for we resort to your God as you do and we have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here’*. Here the inhabitants say that they were settled in

Israel by Esarhaddon (681 – 668 BC). They weren't accepted by Zerubbabel and Jeshua as genuine Israelites.

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon deported in 597 BC the king and the royal family from Judah, the nobles, the warriors and the artisans (2 Kings 24,14: *"He carried all Jerusalem off into exile, all the nobles and all the notables, ten thousand of these were exiled, with all the blacksmiths and metalworkers; only the poorest people in the country were left behind."*).

Several places in Mesopotamia are mentioned in the Bible where the Judahites were settled: Tel-Abib by the river Chebar (Ezekiel 3,15) and the cities otherwise unknown mentioned in Ezra 2,59.

#### **4. The exile as punishment**

Already the testimony of the prophets shows us that the exile of Israel to Babylon has been interpreted as a punishment for the sins of the people. They got punished for their unfaithfulness towards Yahweh, their God, like the desert-generation got punished before.

So it's important to see that the whole exile-generation had to die in the desert, outside of the promised land. (Numbers 14,16: "Yahweh was not able to bring this people into the country which he had sworn to give them, and so he has slaughtered them in the desert."). The punishment is imposed and the people can't escape.

Especially the priestly source (German: "Priesterschrift / Grundschrift" - PG) is convinced that this isn't the final word of God. God will be merciful, when all the sins are expiated in the foreign country, which means, when the generation, which sinned in the years before 586 BC, has died and a new generation in obedience to Yahweh and trusting in his promise has grown up.

This did also mean for the Yahweh-faithful that the time of the exile in Babylon would find its end. It ends like the 40 years in the desert after the redemption of their sins (Numbers 14,34 *"For forty days you reconnoitred the country . Each day will count as a year: for forty years you will bear the consequences of your guilt and learn what it means to reject me."*). Because God is faithful and he keeps his promise of salvation for Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17).

## 5. The sign of the covenant in the changed situation of the exile

The importance of the exile lies in the fact that the centre of gravity of Israelite life and national and religious consciousness was moved to Babylon during the years 587 – 537 BC. It is clear that the exiles and not the peasants left in the land by the Babylonians thought of themselves as Israel. Jeremiah had encouraged them to build houses, plant vineyards, and marry the people among whom they settled (Jeremiah 29,4 ff: “... *Build houses, settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce; marry and have sons and daughters; whose wives for your sons, find husbands for your daughters so that these can bear sons and daughters in their turn; ...*”). He urged them to accept the exile because it was the will of Yahweh that they should be punished, and to await His good pleasure for the redemption of Israel.

The Jews were allowed to live freely in Mesopotamia. They appear in some Babylonian tablets as landowners and moneylenders, and they seem to have gathered in their own communities. Some of them prospered so well that the Jewish colony begun by the deportations of Nebuchadnezzar still existed in the medieval period.

The religious importance of the exile appears not only in the survival of national and religious consciousness but also in extensive work on the sacred books and traditions of Israel.

Certainly it hurts the Yahweh-faithful in Babylon that they can't practise their cult in the central shrine. They're sitting at the shores of Babylon, far away from Jerusalem and also far away from the ruins of the temple.

That's the reason why in this time other signs gained importance:

### **a. The circumcision**

One of these signs is the circumcision, which gets the actual sign of the covenant.

Originally the circumcision isn't really an Israelite phenomenon. We can find in a couple of other cultures. Israel of the early period wasn't the only country, which had this kind of tradition.

Maybe the meaning of the circumcision could have slowly decreased even in Israel – like in other cultures -, maybe it could have disappeared totally.

The exile in Babylon has contributed in a great part to the fact that this didn't happen. Especially in Babylon the circumcision got very important. The cult in the temple was impossible there, but it was possible to execute the circumcision even in the exile.

Moreover it had the side effect to distinguish from the gentiles. In this way the circumcision got the real distinguishing mark from the domestic population in this exile situation.

### ***b. The rule of the Sabbath***

The rule of the Sabbath does also belong to this regulations, which were easy to keep in the exile and got in this way a very special importance. The esteem of the rules of the Sabbath in later times has definitely got its roots in the exile-time.

The rule of the Sabbath is already founded in the story of the creation (Genesis 1,1 – 2,4), which means beyond the creation: As long as Israel will keep the Sabbath, it won't only follow God's central demand at the Sinai, it will also say yes to Yahweh's founded order of creation in the view of all other people.

It seems quite likely that most of the historical books of the OT were collected and edited during the exile. The same is true in much of the prophetic literature, and two major prophetic works, Ezekiel and Isaiah 40 – 55, were written during the exile.

It is possible that the synagogue, of such vital importance in the subsequent history of Judaism, first made its appearance in the exile as a substitute for the worship of the temple.

## **6. Cyrus and the new temple in Jerusalem**

After Jerusalem was fallen in the year 587 / 586 BC under the assault of the Babylonians, the conquerors led the intelligence and the upper class of the Southern kingdom – as above mentioned – into the exile. But in this exile this displaced persons could keep their peculiarity as a group.

This had been totally different 250 years before for the inhabitants of the Northern kingdom. After their deportation as a result of the conquest of the Assyrian in the year 722 BC they got completely broken up and accordingly even wiped out.

But the Jewish parts of the population, which got deported by the Babylonians, survived – in contrast to the North-Israelite tribes – this Babylonian exile for almost five decades.

In the year 539 BC the Babylonian reign was followed by the Persians. After a couple of martial conflicts Cyrus (German: "Kyros"), the king of the Persians and the Meders, could march into Babylon.

In contrast to the religious politics of the Babylonians the Persian ruler usually allowed the defeated folks a generous religious own life. In this way the people from Judah were able to develop intensively their own religious life in the exile again. Cyrus even gave the stock of their temple back to them, which the Babylonians have taken away at the fall of Jerusalem.

In the year of 538 BC king Cyrus published the famous edict, which made it possible for the people of Judah to return to Palestine. The Persian king even allowed the re-erection of the temple.

After the return of the Israelites from the exile the home comer and that part of the population – the poorer part -, who had to stay in the country, started with the new building of the temple. But the work got on very slowly. A couple of times the prophets had to remind of the continuation of the work. So the temple didn't get consecrated until the year 515 BC. But from this time on the temple was again the centre of the religious life of Israel.

## **7. Israel becomes established as cult-community (German: "Kultgemeinde")**

We have to keep in mind that 'from the time of the exile on the term "Israel" doesn't any longer mean the name of a state or the name of part-states (German: "Teilstaaten") of a 12-tribe-union. The name "Israel" isn't any longer the name of a political but of a cultic community. First of all "Israel" means the cult-community around the temple.

Of course did even those Jews belong to Israel, who didn't live in Palestine, for example those Jews, who hadn't returned and still lived in Babylon. Strong impulses came again and again from this huge diaspora-communities (German: "Diasporagemeinden") towards the Jerusalem community.

A very important indication for the fact that Israel was much more a cultic community than a political authority is the case that the king as protector of the temple was replaced by the High Priest (German. "Hohepriester"). In the following he got the most important person of the public life of Israel. It also finds its expression in the fact that the High Priest got a priestly unction (German: "Priestersalbung"). Therefore he got something like a royal honour. In the early period only the king was the real anointed one (German: "Gesalbter").

## **8. New self-government since Ezra and Nehemia (445 BC) in Jerusalem**

### ***a. Nehemiah***

The time after the Babylonian exile did also cause other extensive political changes. First of all Judea wasn't any longer own province of the Persian empire. It did belong to Samaria. As a result a couple of tensions between the former Northern empire and the Southern empire, therefore between Samaria and Jerusalem, grew. This was supported by the circumstance that the Samaritans got to be a mixed population in the meantime. They had mixed with other folks since the conquest of the Assyrians and even internalised their religions.

However in the year 445 BC this situation changed again. The Persians assigned Nehemiah as governor to Jerusalem. He was thought to rebuild the city and to fortify it.

Judea got an own province of the Persian empire. By this fact the tensions with the former Northern empire lost their intensity. They demarcated from Samaria.

### ***b. Ezra***

Chronically the governor Nehemiah overlaps with the priest Ezra. It was him who has given a new cultic order to the post-exile community in that time. Ezra obliged Israel anew on the old tradition, on the Torah.

Now the Torah got the binding and even by the Persians accepted law in Israel. In this way Judea formed from that time on a special community in the Persian empire with its own law.

After the death of Nehemiah and his successor Bagoas (German word!) a council of the eldest (German: "Ältestenrat"), presented by priests and lay people, was assigned instead of the governor. The High Priest as president of this council got more intensified even political functions and got the actual head of the Jewish self-government. Therefore we can see in the following a theocratic form of government, which is dependant on the Persians, but does possess a kind of inner autonomy.



## **9. Inner development of the spiritual and religious situation**

At this time a strong inner development of the religious and spiritual situation of the new Judean form of government took place. So I'd like to take a look at this inner development of the Judaism of this epoch.

### **a. Samaria**

Now the splitting of Samaria gets a final fact. The Samaritans built their own shrine, which is the temple at the mountain Garizim (German word!). And in the following they only acknowledged – like the Sadducees – the Pentateuch as constitutive greatness.

The Pentateuch itself found its final shape at this time. The final edition is to be set in this period.

### **b. The cultic order in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC**

Now a cultic order was accepted in Judea, which can be found in Ezekiel 44,10 – 31:

- The High Priest got the political and religious chief – as above mentioned.
- The actual class of priests was from now on formed by the sons of Zadok. Originally they came from the Levites and called themselves according to the priest Zadok. Only in their duty was the service of sacrifice, which was totally withdrawn from the lay people and only allowed for the priests.
- The Levites themselves hold only a comparable role for the lower clergy. They have been only allowed to prepare the sacrifice or have been singers and door-keepers at the temple.
- Over and above that we find at this time even slaves of the temple, who are responsible for the music.

In the holiday calendar of the Judean cult-community the so-called “day of reconciliation” gets at the side of the Pasha feast. It becomes the most important feast besides the Pasha.

Apart from the sacrifice-service, which was only possible to take place at the temple of Jerusalem, a teaching- and prayer-service grew more intensified in the synagogues. It was influenced by teaching on law, interpretation of law and the prayer.

### ***c. Law and scripture***

This does even point out to the special importance, which the law takes up now. The law becomes the absolute greatness. It is considered to be the highest gift of God and requires special instruction and knowledge.

Interpretation, preaching and questions of the use of the law play now a big part. This job is done by the scribes, who gain more and more importance in the future.

In connection with this development the Torah gets even canonical character. Under addition of the prophets and other scriptures it gets more a Holy Scripture. This is supported by the fact that the Torah is read in the service at the synagogue. The more it gets read the more intensive it gets honoured as a Holy Scripture in the awareness of the faithful. Thus the process of canonisation caused itself reciprocal.

The more the law got into the consciousness of God's People the more it got the actual criteria of affiliation to Israel. The affiliation to the post-exile Israel is therefore not only given by the nation. Everyone, who bows to the law, can be admitted to the cult-community. This new members are called Proselytes (German: "Proselyten") – also called "Godfearing". They are foreigners, which can be admitted to the cult-community by circumcision and provided they would fulfil the law.

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