Introduction

The years of the Babylonian Empire constituted the most important turning point in the history of Judah and the Judeans in the first millennium B.C.E. Babylon’s first 15 years of rule in Hatti-land (604–589 B.C.E.) were fraught with more turbulence than any other period in the history of the kingdom of Judah. The small kingdom was passed from hand to hand between Egypt and Babylon in a battle of Titans, and the entire period was characterized by governmental instability and steadily increasing religious agitation. For the first time, the king was sent into exile and, with him, many of the nation’s elite. The conflict between the exiles and those who remained in the land along with the rifts between the political-religious leadership in Jerusalem and many of those living in peripheral areas all reflect the strong inner turbulence that developed in Judah, at least partly in response to the external pressure. The inner tumult, combined with the external instability, hastened the end of the kingdom.

Babylon’s expedition against Judah in 588–586 B.C.E. sealed Judah’s fate and for generations afterward shaped the national consciousness, the people’s perception of religion and ritual, and the nation’s historical memory. Jerusalem—“the city that the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, to put His name there” (1 Kgs 14:21)—the ancient capital of Judah, ceased to exist, leaving a huge hole in the heart of the nation and dealing a severe blow to its social, economic, and political life. The destruction of the Temple—“the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells” (Ps. 26:8)—the ancient spiritual, cultic, and religious center of the nation, left an enormous hole and led to a major crisis that was attended by the need to reshape the account of the nation’s history and to give the history new meaning. The royal house that had ruled the kingdom since its establishment and that many believed would “be established before the Lord for ever” (1 Kgs 2:45) fared no better. Zedekiah’s sons were put to death, his eyes were put out, and he was brought to Babylon, where he died. Meanwhile, Jehoiachin, who was imprisoned in Babylon, was the last remnant of the Davidic royal line. Compounding the leadership vacuum and the severe religious crisis was the exiling of Jerusalem’s residents, including many of the nation’s elite from among the priestly families, the aristocracy, and the royal family, who had controlled the kingdom’s economy, led the nation, and shaped its consciousness, culture, and religion.

Jerusalem was not the only city that was destroyed. The urban and military centers in the Shephelah were also laid waste, and all of the governmental
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apparatus and the army of Judah ceased to exist. In the wake of these events came the collapse of the outlying settlements in the Jordan Valley and along the western shore of the Dead Sea, the Negev, the southern hills of Judah, and the southern Shephelah. Many of the residents abandoned these areas, and the Judahites who had inhabited these areas for centuries quickly became a small minority within an Arabian-Idumean majority that steadily grew in strength.

Thus, at the time of Babylonian rule, an unprecedented demographic shift took place in Judah that resulted in the dwindling of the local population, leaving it less than half its previous size.

However, the destruction, exile, and national crisis were the beginning of a new stage in the history of the people and the land. The exiled elite in Babylon were forced to adjust to life without a land, without a nation, and without the Temple. They were exposed to the influence of the wealthy, powerful, ancient Babylonian culture and religion (and, in the course of time, to the cultures and religions of the Persian Empire) and developed new patterns of community life and a new system of faith, ideas, and ways of looking at history that were suited to exiles living as a small minority in a foreign country. The need to understand the past and to reshape spiritual life and religion led to the creation of an extensive body of literature, unparalleled in size and importance. This was the beginning of a new Judaism—the Judaism of the Second Temple period.

The people who remained in their houses in the land, on the other hand, without a royal house, Temple, or ancient capital were forced to develop alternatives that, until then, could not have evolved. Because of the religious and ritual supremacy of Jerusalem at the end of seventh century B.C.E., along with its social and political centrality, the development of alternate centers was prohibited, particularly after the reform of Josiah. The power and sanctity of the royal house and the immense power of the old elite also prevented change, as long as both existed. However, after the royal house and the old elite had disappeared, there was room for a new elite, an alternate local leadership under the aegis of the Babylonians, and other government and religious centers as well to emerge.

A large Judean population remained in two areas left intact by the Babylonians: in the region of Benjamin, north of Jerusalem, and in the northern Judean hills, south of the city. It was in these two areas that many of those who remained in Judah settled after the destruction of Jerusalem, and here the process of rebuilding under the protection of the Babylonian Empire began. In place of the devastated city of Jerusalem, the Babylonians established Mizpah in the region of Benjamin as the capital of the province. In place of the House of David, they appointed Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, from one of the most respected and renowned families in the land. In place of the Temple in Jerusalem, and at a time when its ruins were a pilgrimage destination for small groups and individuals, alternative centers of worship arose in the country (Mizpah, Gibeon, Bethel, and perhaps even Shechem), and these sites competed with
one another for the place of honor and promoted their religious traditions from earlier periods in national history.

All of these changes had unprecedented social, ideological, and religious significance, and this is attested by the various debates embedded in the biblical literature: Who was “Judah”—the people exiled to Babylon or those who remained in the land? Were those who were exiled the ones who had sinned and therefore been punished? Or were those who were left behind (proof that they had not sinned) entitled to inherit the lands and property of those in exile? If Jerusalem was not the eternal capital of the Lord, what was its status now and what was the status of the capital that replaced it? If the Temple in Jerusalem was not the only site where worship of the God of Israel might be carried on, what was the alternative? What was the status of the House of David, exiled in Babylon? What should one’s attitude be toward the new leaders appointed by the Babylonians?

However, the time of Babylonian rule was relatively brief, as were the changes in society, religion, and religious ritual instituted by the people remaining in Judah. After two generations of Babylonian exile, the time for redemption arrived. Cyrus, who inherited the rule of the entire area occupied by the Babylonian Empire (539 B.C.E.), conquered the city of Babylon. With the support of the Persian regime, the exiled elite in Babylon through their representatives, the returnees to Zion, initiated the long process by which Jerusalem was again established as the nation’s uncontested political, social, and religious capital. Success was finally achieved by the exiles, after long years of struggle against economic hardship, the neighboring provinces, and the large number of residents who had remained in Judah—residents who were less than delighted to reassume the yoke of the new-old elite leadership.

Both the dwindling population of the Benjamin region during the Persian Period and the abandonment of the important centers that had developed there during the Babylonian years are evidence of the shifts that took place in Judah during the “Return to Zion.” The polemics embedded in the Bible against alternate religious and political centers such as Mizpah, Bethel, Gibeon, and Shechem display evidence of attempts to obliterate the enhancement of these sites’ status during the period between the destruction of Jerusalem and its return to center stage. The “myth of the empty land” was granted credence by means of a historical “blackout.” The exiled elite who participated in the Return to Zion, along with their representatives in Judah, attempted to expunge the history of those who remained in the land during the Babylonian exile. The historiographical literature opened with the period of return being a direct continuation of the period of destruction.

Despite the acknowledged importance of the period of Babylonian rule as a time when the religious, social, and cultural character of the Judahites was consolidated, despite the centrality of this era in the crystallization and shaping of
biblical literature, and despite the decisive geopolitical events of this time, the era is one of the least investigated and least known in the history of the Jewish people and in the history of Palestine. In much of past historical and archaeological literature, this period has been viewed as transitional between the First Temple Period, which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (586 B.C.E.), and the Second Temple Period, which began in the days of the Return to Zion (538 B.C.E.). Even in modern scholarship, this period continues to be perceived as the “dark ages” in terms of history and an era that has no independent raison d’être in terms of archaeology.

The paucity of historical sources from this era, either biblical or extrabiblical, could explain the historical blackout. The brevity of the period of Babylonian rule (less than 70 years) could explain the difficulty of identifying and characterizing the material culture of this period. However, it seems to me that the major factor affecting research on the period has been the core attitudes and prior historical perceptions that researchers have brought to the material. Of course, these perspectives were influenced by the historiographical literature itself in its accounts of the “destruction of Judah” and “the exile period”; by the lamentations and prophecies attributed to this time; and, primarily, by perspectives presented in the literature of the Return to Zion, which gave shape to “the myth of the empty land.”

In this book I will present an extensive, comprehensive profile of the period of Babylonian rule over Judah and will establish the importance of this time as shaping the demographic and geopolitical processes that would eventuate in Palestine between the end of the First Temple Period and the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman periods. This background will provide a basis for reexamining the perceptions and biases embedded in biblical historiography and for identifying the time, place, and goals of these compositions, as well as their target audiences.