

The Israelites in Palestine during the Babylonian Exile

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the identity and conditions of the Israelite community who did not go into the Babylonian exile. Their identity, religious background, and socio-economic conditions are investigated. Despite the fact that they were the majority, they were left poor through the redistribution plan of the Babylonians. They continued to worship at the site of the temple, and the people who returned after the exile therefore had no right to exclude them from rebuilding the temple.

A INTRODUCTION

I have argued elsewhere (Farisani 2002; 2003) that a contestation exists between the עַם הָאָרֶץ and the returned exiles¹ in Ezra-Nehemiah, and that the Ezra-Nehemiah text is coloured with an exclusivist ideology, an ideology which is biased in favour of the returned exiles, but against the עַם הָאָרֶץ. Furthermore, I have also argued that if Ezra-Nehemiah were to be used by theologians to address the current challenges in Africa, it would have to be read taking into account the voice of the עַם הָאָרֶץ as well as that of the returned exiles, rather than addressing the latter alone (Farisani 2002; 2004). I have also provided a detailed discussion of both the religious and socio-economic conditions of the Israelites in exile (Farisani 2004).

This paper focuses only on the Israelite community that did not go into exile. The purpose of this paper is thus to provide a socio-historical analysis of the conflict between the עַם הָאָרֶץ and the returned exiles by only discussing the Israelites in Palestine. In order to effectively achieve the above stated purpose, this paper is approached in six steps. Firstly, we provide a general socio-his-

¹ By the returned exiles here we are referring to all the Jews who were taken into exile by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., and returned back home with the assistance of the Persian king Cyrus in 539 B.C. The עַם הָאָרֶץ are those Jews who did not go into Babylonian exile but stayed in Palestine.

torical overview of the rise of Babylon and the fall of Judah, which led to a small number of people being taken into Babylonian exile while the majority of them remained in Palestine. Secondly, we give a detailed examination of the religious conditions of the עַם הָאָרֶץ. Lastly, we examine the socio-historical conditions of the עַם הָאָרֶץ.

We begin by analysing the rise of Babylon and the fall of Judah, which resulted in the destruction of the city and the temple of Jerusalem.

B THE RISE OF BABYLONIA AND THE FALL OF JUDAH

This discussion sets the scene for an analysis in the next section of the conditions of Palestine during the Babylonian exilic period. We now turn to Babylon's rise to power.

1 Babylon rises to power

When Josiah ascended to the throne in 638 B.C., Judah entered her closing period of history. No longer was there reason to fear Assyria, for Ashurbanipal's (the Assyrian ruler of the time) last years witnessed little military activity and only weak rulers followed him until Nineveh's fall in 612 B.C. Babylon, however, soon took over as world leader, bringing in the period known as the Neo-Babylonian (Miller and Hayes 2006:449). This shift of power came at the close of Josiah's thirty-one year reign. Josiah's term of rule, then, was relatively free from foreign interference and dangers (Wood 1970:366; Miller and Hayes 2006:454). King Josiah died in 609 B.C. He was succeeded by Jehoahaz. However, the Egyptians who now controlled Palestine removed him from the throne after a three month reign (since he favoured Babylon). They named his older brother Jehoiakim to be king (Boadt 1984:364; Miller and Hayes 2006:461). When the Babylonians drove the Egyptians out of Asia in 605, Jehoiakim had a change of heart and pledged loyalty to Babylon. Not long after this he began to plot toward breaking free of foreign control (Boadt 1984:364; Collins 2004:277; Miller and Hayes 2006:466).

In response to Jehoiakim's actions, in 601 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon moved against Egypt and was met by Necho, the Egyptian ruler of the time, near the border (Wood 1970:373-4). Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemich (cf. Jer 46:2). Then the region became the domain of the Babylonians. Judah automatically came under Babylonian rule, even though it was governed until 601/00 B.C. by the vassal Jehoiakim (Richards 1994:258; Miller and Hayes 2006:466ff).

The rise of Babylon to power led to the first capture of Judah by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. In the next sub-section we discuss circumstances around this capture.

2 Jehoiachin and the capture of Jerusalem in 597 B.C.

In 599 B.C. Jehoiakim refused to pay the annual tribute to Babylon. Then the Babylonian regime, with a force comprised of Babylonians and Ammonite, Edomite and Moabite allies, captured Jerusalem in 598 B.C. (2 Kings 24:10-16; Richards 1994:258; Boadt 1984:364; Miller and Hayes 2006:467) and stripped the temple of all its treasures (Boadt 1984:364). Jehoiakim died (598) in the middle of this rebellion and left Jehoiachin, his eighteen-year-old son to become king (Boadt 1984:364; Wood 1970:374; Richards 1994:258; Miller and Hayes 2006:468). Jehoiachin received the blow of the Babylonian attack the following March, in 597 B.C., which brought severe devastation (Wood 1970:374). Jehoiachin was taken captive to Babylon in 597 (Wood 1970:374; Boadt 1984:364; Richards 1994:258; Collins 2004:277) along with the queen mother, princes, servants, and booty (Wood 1970:374; Miller and Hayes 2006:468), including the prophet Ezekiel (2 Kings 24:14; Jer 52:28), and with him 10,000 leading citizens, including a thousand craftsmen and smiths (II Kings 24:11-16; Wood 1970:374; Richards 1994:258; Miller and Hayes 2006:468). Several thousand more people would be taken to Babylon in a later deportation in 586 B.C.

Nebuchadnezzar installed Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, Josiah's third son, on the throne (Wood 1970:374-375; Boadt 1984:364; Miller and Hayes 2006:468). He was twenty-one at the time, fifteen years younger than Jehoiakim, the oldest of the three sons. Nebuchadnezzar changed his name to Zedekiah, after the pattern of Pharaoh Necho regarding Jehoiakim (Wood 1970:374-375; Miller and Hayes 2006:468). The people of Judah seem never to have accepted Zedekiah as their true king, probably because he had been appointed by the foreign Nebuchadnezzar. Instead, they continued to ascribe this honour to Jehoiachin, who was still in captivity (Wood 1970:374-375; Richards 1994:258). In the next subsection we examine Zedekiah's reign and spell out certain issues which led to the fall of Jerusalem.

3 Zedekiah and the captivity of 586 B.C.

As a result of Zekediah's lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the local people, and because of Zedekiah's own poor judgment and general inability, his term of reign was beset by continual agitation and unrest (Wood 1970:374-375).

A strong anti-Babylonian group in Jerusalem brought pressure for a revolt and urged Zedekiah to look again to Egypt for help (Wood 1970:375; Miller and Hayes 2006:470ff). A new coalition was formed consisting of Edom, Moab, Ammon, and Phoenicia (Jer 27:1-3); and this Jerusalem group wished Judah to join in (Wood 1970:375; Richards 1994:258; Miller and Hayes 2006:469). Certain prophets who were opposed to Jeremiah's message aided their cause in declaring that God had already broken the yoke of Babylon and that within two years Judah's captives would return home to Jerusalem (Jer

28:2-4). In opposition, Jeremiah denounced this manner of speaking, declaring it false and urging continued acceptance of Babylonian lordship (Jer 27:1-22; Wood 1970:375; Richards 1994:258; Miller and Hayes 2006:470ff). Two other developments outside Judah helped fan revolutionary flames in Zedekiah's fourth year. These were the fact that Psammetichus II succeeded Necho in Egypt, and that a minor rebellion was staged in Babylon itself. Still, however, Zedekiah was not persuaded to listen to the anti-Babylonians (Wood 1970:375). Instead, he showed good judgement in sending a representative to Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon (Jer 29:3;51-59), perhaps even going himself to express Judah's loyalty (Wood 1970:375; Richards 1994:258; Miller and Hayes 2006:473). But five years later, Zedekiah was persuaded. He then did choose to revolt, and he looked to Egypt for support (Wood 1970:375; Collins 2004:277).

So king Zedekiah, who had been appointed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to rule Judah as a vassal king in 597 B.C., rebelled against his overlord in spite of the many warnings of Jeremiah (Wittenberg 1993:97; Drane 2005:159ff; Miller and Hayes 2006:474). Zedekiah broke with Babylon in about 589 B.C. under the prodding of the new Egyptian pharaoh, Hophra (Boadt 1984:364; Miller and Hayes 2006:475). Nebuchadnezzar decided to punish him and marched against Judah. In January 588 B.C. his great army surrounded Jerusalem after taking all the strong fortresses of the land (Wittenberg 1993:97; Wood 1970:375). During the summer months the Babylonians had to lift the siege for some time because an Egyptian army advanced in support of Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem (Wittenberg 1993:96). The people in Jerusalem rejoiced because they believed that the Babylonians would soon be defeated (Wittenberg 1993:96-7). It was Jeremiah who had a more realistic view of the situation. He told the king that the Babylonians would soon be back to carry on the siege (see Jer 37:6-8). And this is exactly what happened. Jerusalem held out till the next summer, but its fate was sealed (Wittenberg 1993:97; Miller and Hayes 2006:469ff). Nebuchadnezzar captured all the cities of Judah, surrounded Jerusalem and for two years starved the people into defeat (Boadt 1984:365; Wood 1970:376).

By July 587/586, when all food supplies were finished, the Babylonians managed to break the city walls of Jerusalem and enter the city (Wittenberg 1993:97; Miller and Hayes 2006:476). In accordance with Jeremiah's warning, the city fell to the Babylonians in July, 586 B.C. (Wood 1970:376; Drane 2005:164; Miller and Hayes 2006:478). Babylon deported the better qualified elements of Judah's population (Richards 1994:256-7; Miller and Hayes 2006:478).

Then, Zedekiah with soldiers, servants and members of his family fled towards the Jordan, but he was captured and brought to Nebuchadnezzar at his headquarters at Riblah in central Syria. His fate was gruesome. His sons were killed before his eyes, he himself was blinded and taken in chains to Babylon

where he died (see Jer 39; Wittenberg 1993:97; Wood 1970:376; Boadt 1984:365; Lemche 1988:179; Collins 2004:277; Drane 2005:164; Miller and Hayes 2006:476ff). The Babylonians no doubt regarded him as an unfaithful vassal who had conspired against the very lord who had originally installed him in office, thereby breaking the covenant that existed between them (Lemche 1988:179).

A month after the fall of Jerusalem, Nebuzaradan, commander of Nebuchadnezzar's bodyguard, arrived to break down the city. He levelled the city walls and then set fire to all the houses and public buildings (Wittenberg 1993:97; Boadt 1984:365; Miller and Hayes 2006:478). In this great destruction the temple, built by Solomon, which had stood for four centuries, went up in flames as well (Wittenberg 1993:97; Wood 1970:376; Drane 2005:164). Many other places in Judah met the same fate as Jerusalem (Richards 1994:259).

So, with the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians created two communities within the Jewish population, namely the **עַם הָאָרֶץ**, that is, the Jews that remained in the land, and those taken into Babylonian captivity. The focus of this paper is on the **עַם הָאָרֶץ**. Accordingly, in the next section, we examine the identity, religious and socio-historical conditions of the **עַם הָאָרֶץ**.

C ISRAELITES IN PALESTINE

1 Definition of the **עַם הָאָרֶץ**

A Hebrew term (singular: **עַם הָאָרֶץ**; Plural: **עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ**, **עַמֵּי הָאָרְצוֹת**) literally meaning 'people of the land', occurs 73 times in the Old Testament (51 times in singular form and 22 times in plural form) (Healey 1992:168; Farisani 2004).

There are many opinions regarding the exact meaning of this term (Healey 1992:168). Ernst Würthwein has argued that the term refers to fully enfranchised male citizens (Healey 1992:168). He states that this group represents a sort of power elite, which forms the solid core of the nation. Würthwein argues that this group not only formed a distinct social group but that they, in fact, represented a powerful class whose 'economic, social, and military power combined to make them a critical faction in the functioning of the state' (Healey 1992:168). He goes on to trace the development of this group from the earliest period of the monarchy, identifying the **עַם הָאָרֶץ** with the **אֲנָשֵׁי יְהוּדָה** of 2 Sam 2:4. The power of the group was most prevalent in the early period of the Davidic-Solomonic monarchy when the interests of the various 'tribal' groups had to be carefully manipulated to achieve consensus on the monarchy and on the specific choice of kings (Healey 1992:168; Farisani 2004).

Würthwein sees the most significant development of the term **עַם הָאָרֶץ** as coming after the division of the united kingdom of Israel into two parts, and

specifically in Judah in the period between Athaliah (842-837 B.C.) and the Exile (589 B.C.) (Healey 1992:168). Würthwein argues that during this period the term was used to designate a specific, identifiable class. The cases cited are first the role of the **עַם הָאָרֶץ** in the overthrow of Athaliah and the selection of Joash (2 Kings 11; 2 Chronicles 23) (Healey 1992:168). In that instance the **עַם הָאָרֶץ** are associated with other clearly designated groups (priests, palace officials, military leaders) in the revolution and enthronement of the new king (Healey 1992:168; Farisani 2004).

De Vaux sees the term as simply designating the ‘body of free men, enjoying civic rights in a given territory’ (in Healey 1992:168). He considers the term’s use in three periods. Firstly, in the pre-exilic period, it is associated with specific groups: the king or the prince, the king and his servants, priests and chiefs, the chiefs, the priests, and the prophets, and with no others. He argues, however, that it designates simply the ‘whole body of citizens’ (in Healey 1992:168). De Vaux endeavours to show that in 2 Kings 11:20, where a distinction apparently is made between ‘the people of the land’ and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the distinction is not based on ‘class’ differences but simply on residency (those inside and outside the city) (Healey 1992:169). Secondly, at the time of the return from exile, the term at first has this old meaning, but in Ezra-Nehemiah it begins to change. Here in Ezra-Nehemiah the term begins to take on a different meaning (Healey 1992:169). Ezra 4:4 contrasts the ‘people of the land’ and the ‘people of Judah’ in a way that indicates a conflict of interests (Healey 1992:169). Most significantly, the term is used in the plural in the post-exilic period (Healey 1992:169; Bergman and Ottoson 1974:388ff); it is used either to indicate the group which opposed the restoration of the temple state or to refer to the heterogeneous population which the returnees found in the land. This population is characteristically viewed with disdain (Ezra 9:1, 2; 10:2, 11; Neh 10:20-31) (Healey 1992:169; see also Lipinski and von Soden 2001:175; see also Wittenberg 1991:151ff; Elwell 2001:1008; Stewart, 1996:899). Finally, rabbinic Judaism labelled the Jewish people who were unwilling or unable to observe the whole law as **עַם הָאָרֶץ** (Elwell 2001:1008; Stewart 1996:899; Farisani 2004).

How, then, is the term **עַם הָאָרֶץ** used by the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah? The words ‘enemies of’ **צָרִי**, ‘our enemies’ **צָרֵינוּ** (Ezr 4:1; Neh 4:11, 15) and ‘people of the land’ **עַם הָאָרֶץ** / ‘peoples of the lands’ **עַמֵּי הָאָרְצוֹת** (Ezra 3:3; 4:4; 9:1, 2, 11; 10:2, 11; 6:21; Neh 9:24, 30; 10:29, 31, 32; 13:3) refer to the people of the land, namely those Israelites who did not form part of the Babylonian exile, but remained in Palestine. Throughout the Ezra-Nehemiah text the ‘enemies’ **צָרֵינוּ** are introduced as opposing the returned exiles. Coggins (1965:124-127) has correctly argued that ‘our enemies’ **צָרֵינוּ** should not be regarded as Samaritans, but as Jewish nationalistic groups who were against the building of the temple (see also Fensham 1982:68; Farisani 2004).

From this general review it is clear that there is little evidence to support extreme interpretations of the term (Healey 1992:169). But there is sufficient evidence in various periods to indicate that within a carefully defined context the term may have specific senses (Healey 1992:169). Our focus in this study is specifically on the post-exilic interpretation of the term עַם הָאָרֶץ. Having analysed the term עַם הָאָרֶץ in this subsection, we move on to the socio-economic conditions of the עַם הָאָרֶץ.

2 Socio-Economic conditions

a Babylonians' population-deportation policy

What was the Babylonian population's displacement policy? Both Assyria and Babylon used deportation as a means of controlling and suppressing nationalistic tendencies in the colonies (Richards 1994:242). But Gottwald (1985:424) contrasts well the difference between Babylonian and Assyrian colonial practice, when he states that,

The Assyrians replaced deported Israelite leaders with colonists from other parts of the empire, thereby deliberately disturbing the previous social and cultural fabric of the region and making it difficult for a homogenous Israelite culture and religion to flourish. By contrast, the Neo-Babylonians followed a less decisive policy with Judah. The leadership of Judah deported in 597 was replaced with a 'second team' and, when the latter were deported in 586, yet another attempt was made to form a native administration under Gedaliah. The deportation of 582 may have followed in the wake of Gedaliah's assassination.

There is, in short, no indication that Nebuchadnezzar ever introduced foreign population into Judah. On the other hand, neighboring people were enabled to encroach on the territory of Judah, most strikingly the Edomites... It is likely that Ammonites and Moabites reclaimed territories in Transjordan and perhaps even west of Jordan, while Samaritans probably pressed into Judah from the north to occupy deserted estates. Nonetheless, there remained a reduced heartland in Judah largely untouched by a residential infusion of foreigners (Gottwald 1985: 424).

The general Babylonian policy included the removal of the leadership strata. However, their observation of this principle was by no means as vigorous as that of the Assyrians had been in the preceding centuries. There are no signs at all that suggest that the forcibly deported segments of society were replaced with individuals who had been likewise removed from other parts of the Neo-Babylonian empire (Lemche 1988:176; Leclerc 2007:280). It is important to note here that the Babylonian deportation policy would mean that no foreign population was introduced in Judah which might have changed the ethnic com-

position of the populace or introduced cultural developments in Palestine in the period after 587 B.C. (Lemche 1988:176; Drane 2005:177; Miller and Hayes 2006:482; Leclerc 2007:280).

So the Babylonian deportation policy would have meant that few people were taken into exile while the majority remained in Palestine. The Chronistic history makes it seem as if all Israel was deported and the land of Judah was uninhabited during the exile (II Chron 36:21), but this does not correspond with the historical facts (Albertz 1994:371). Even if we are unclear about the precise number of those exiled, we can say with certainty that the deportations affected only a minority, above all the upper class; the majority of the population, above all the small landowners and the landless lower classes, remained in the land (Albertz 1994:371; Grabbe 1992:120-121; Hinson 1973:153; Van Zyl et al. 1979:192-193), and that they were the least skilled or qualified (Hinson 1973:153). These poor farmers, who constituted 90% of the population, were left behind to continue with the tilling of the soil (Jer 52:16; 2 Kings 25:12; Blenkinsopp 1988:66; Lemche 1988:176; Richards 1994:260).

But why were only poor people left behind? The idea of taking influential persons of a conquered nation as captives was copied by the Babylonians from the Assyrians. The latter had found the policy effective in minimising chances of revolution, and Nebuchadnezzar desired the same benefit (Wood 1970:377). Van Zyl too argues that the main reason why Babylonian invaders only left behind the poor and less skilled people in Palestine may have been Nebuchadnezzar's efforts 'to ensure that there would be no leaders left in Judah who could organise a rebellion' (Van Zyl et al. 1979:192-3; cf. Wittenberg 1993:97). It is equally important to note, however, that the deportation of poor unskilled people to Babylon would have had serious economic consequences for the Babylonian economy, as this would be very expensive economically to maintain a lot of poor people who had no skills to boost the Babylonian economy.

Having discussed the Babylonian deportation policy, we will now move on to analyse the structure of the local government in Judah at this time.

b Structure of local government

At this time Judah was now a province of Babylon. The Babylonian colonial policy of local government differed from that of the Assyrians, in that the Babylonians appointed a governor who was drawn from the local Jewish nobility, in this case, a certain Gedaliah was appointed governor of Judah (Jer 40: 7; 2 Kings 25:22ff; Richards 1994:259; Miller and Hayes 2006:482).

Who was this Gedaliah? Gedaliah was the son of Ahikam, grandson of Shaphan (2 Kings 25:22). With Jerusalem destroyed, Gedaliah established a new capital at Mizpah (Wood 1970:377-378; Wittenberg 1993:98; Drane

2005:173), because Jerusalem was no longer inhabitable (Wittenberg 1993:98). He ruled from Mizpah (Blenkinsopp 1998:27-28; 2 Kings 25:22; Hinson 1973:139; Van Zyl et al. 1979:196; Boadt 1984:405-6; Grabbe 1992:80-84; Gottwald 1985:424; Miller and Hayes 2006:484). So Mizpah replaced Jerusalem as the new capital for practical and strategic reasons, including the need for open communications with the central and northern regions, now largely destroyed and depopulated (2 Kings 25:22-26; Jer 40:6-41:18; Blenkinsopp 1998:27-28). Though Gedaliah was a Judean, he enjoyed no liberty. He was an official of the foreign king, and thus merely a representative of the overlord to whom he was responsible for everything (Van Zyl et al., 1979:196; Gottwald 1985:424; Richards 1994:263-4; Miller and Hayes 2006:484). Gedaliah tried to build up the land once again and agriculture flourished to some degree (Jer 40:10, 12). Jews who had fled to the neighbouring states of Moab, Ammon and Edom began to return (Jer 40:11; Van Zyl et al. 1979:196). Though Gedaliah's government might have helped the region towards economic recovery as well as provisional administrative and social structures, it did not last long (Richards 1994:262).

Gedaliah had been governor for only two months when he was treacherously murdered by Ishmael, a member of the royal family (Wood 1970:378; Drane 2005:174; Miller and Hayes 2006:485). Ishmael acted on behalf of a Judah loyalist group, which refused to recognise the legitimacy of Gedaliah. This group, fearing reprisals from the Babylonian regime, fled Judah. Some settled in the Transjordan, Syria, and Phoenicia while a large party of them fled to Egypt (Gottwald 1985:424; Richards 1994:263-4; Lemche 1988:177; Miller and Hayes 2006:486). Jeremiah received God's revelation, which instructed the people to remain in the land and not to fear, for the Babylonians would not retaliate. Jeremiah communicated this good information to the people, warning particularly against seeking shelter in Egypt. The people, however, broke their promise and refused to accept the word which he brought. Instead, they accused him of speaking falsely. They made plans to go to Egypt (Wood 1970:379; Drane 2005:174). Jeremiah went as well, certainly against his will, but likely in an effort to keep God's Word before the people as best he could (Wood 1970:379; Lemche 1988:177; Miller and Hayes 2006:486).

The populace of Jerusalem was decidedly decreased as the number of Judeans who made the journey was large, with a second tier of leadership now also dispersed, leaving the infrastructure of the surviving Palestinian community strained (Richards 1994:263-4; Wood 1970:379). Elders played a significant role in this time.

What were the roles played by elders in this local structure? The loss of a central political authority led to the revival of decentralised forms of organisation along kinship lines. In the Israel of the exilic period the family or the family association became the main social entity. Relics of tribal organisation

which had never been completely forgotten were revived: the elders again became significant and took over limited local and political functions of leadership alongside priests and prophets (Albertz 1994:374-5).

As the Babylonians did not import a foreign upper class, the people of Judah could evidently even develop a limited degree of self-government on the basis of elders (Lam 5:12), revitalizing institutions from before the time of the state. However, the place of the royal central authority was now taken by the provincial administration, to whom taxes were to be paid and for whom services were to be performed (Lam 5:12f.), in the same manner as it was done for the Israelite king. To this degree little changed on the land for the majority of small farming families (Albertz 1994:372).

In addition, Gottwald argues that those left behind, that is, the poor of the land,

...tapped a wealth of local custom and were experienced participants and leaders in village cooperative networks. Thus the ancient village tribalism overlaid for centuries, was able to re-emerge as the dominant force in organising and preserving Palestinian Jewish identity throughout the exile, no matter how much hampered by the imposition of Neo-Babylonian domination (Gottwald 1985:425; cf. Richards 1994:267-8).

While acknowledging the important role of elders during this period, we also need to realise that the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem witnessed the end of the institutional-ideological infrastructure of the state of Judah. Judah shifted from being an autonomous state to being a mere colony of Babylon (Richards 1994:270).

The fact that Judah was now a mere colony of Babylon was also reflected in the new Babylonian land policy, to which we now turn in the next section.

c Land policies

On the question of land, the Babylonians were unique in their approach. They redistributed² the land of those whom they deported to what Soggin (1984:252) calls 'the sub-proletariat of the city and the country' for cultivation (Jer 39:10; 2 Kings 25:12//Jer 52:16 cf. Ezek 33:21-27; Soggin 1984:252; Richards 1994:259; Miller and Hayes 2006:485). There may have been several reasons for this step, such as for the loyalty of the local populace (Lemche 1988:177). Accordingly, the Babylonians

² While it has been suggested that the Babylonians redistributed the land of the deportees, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the Babylonian invaders themselves seized some of the properties.

created a class of small landowners who were not imported from abroad and whose rights were based not on inheritance or purchase, but derived from the intervention of the occupying power; they owed everything to it and therefore were unconditionally faithful (Soggin 1984: 252; Richards 1994:259).

Another consideration is the fact that cultivable land was always scarce in Palestine. It was therefore simply too valuable to let it lie fallow (Lemche 1988:177). It is also possible though, that the basic intention of the Babylonian reform had to do with the annulment of debt-and property-relations which were based on the accrual of debt. Peasants were frequently forced to hand over their land to their creditors in order to pay off their debts. This custom had flourished in Babylon more than a thousand years earlier; it is possible that the Babylonian undertaking had a socio-ideological background (Lemche 1988:178).

Thus, the installation of the landless and refugees on the properties of the large landowners (Jer 39:10; 40:10) which had either been abandoned or even confiscated (Lam 5:2) indicates that it was in the interests of the Babylonian occupying power to consolidate the situation as soon as possible in the land which had been devastated by the war (Albertz 1994:371-2; Miller and Hayes 2006:485).

At all events we can conclude from the slogan handed down in Ezek 11:15 and 33:23 that the majority of those who remained in the land were positive about the division of property and even justified it theologically. For them the exile was Yahweh's judgement on the exploitation of the upper class and often even a *de facto* liberation from debt (Albertz 1994:371-2). So though life may not have been easy, it was looking up for many of those left (Grabbe 1992:116-8). In the next section we examine how the עַם הָאֲרֶץ coped economically.

d Economic and social status

The situation of the people who were not exiled was difficult, in spite of the fact that many received land *via* Babylonian policy (Richards 1994:261; Miller and Hayes 2006:481). The economic damage done by the disaster cannot be overestimated. Archaeological excavations have shown that really all the fortified towns in the heartland of Judah were razed to the ground and in most cases they were not to be rebuilt for many years to come (Wittenberg 1993:97; Miller and Hayes 2006:479ff). The social and economic structures which had given expression to their culture were simply no longer alive (Richards 1994:261; Miller and Hayes 2006:480). The temple was destroyed, as well as the ruling house and the state (Lam 1-2; 4-5, Richards 1994:261).

The economic and state structures were of course severely damaged by the Babylonian conquest. As Ezekiel 33:24 tells us, there were those living in

the ruins of the country. Jeremiah 41:5 mentions a pilgrimage to the temple of Jerusalem by inhabitants of territories of Schechem and Shiloh, in other words, inhabitants of the former northern kingdom (Richards 1994:262). Similarly, Soggin elaborates,

After all, the interest of Babylon was in destroying Judah as a military base, as a bridge for Egyptian attacks, and therefore in dismantling fortifications; but that clearly also caused the destruction of other buildings whose purpose was not military (Soggin 1984:256).

Therefore, the real threat from which the population of Judah had to suffer came from abroad, from the neighbouring small states which took advantage of the decline in the population of Judah and the quite weak Babylonian military presence to invade from all sides the territory in which Judah had settled and make their political and economic interests felt (Albertz 1994:372-3). As a result, the best of the farmland was no longer within the borders of the province (Grabbe 1992:121-122). The bulk of the province was now located in the hill country and much of the land good for grain production was now lost; it is possible that Judah was not even self-sufficient in grain production (Grabbe 1992:116-118). So although they still lived in their own land, those who remained behind had to a large degree lost their territorial and social integrity (Albertz 1994:372-3).

Grabbe reminds us that the country was a small, subordinate state most of the time, paying its required tribute but otherwise carrying on at a fairly low level economically and culturally. It was not a wealthy country. Its economy was heavily agrarian; Jerusalem was the only real urban area (Grabbe 1992:23), and skilled handicrafts and manufacturing were at a minimum, at least in the early part of the post-exilic period (Grabbe 1992:121-122). Graham (1984) amasses textual and archaeological evidence to show the way in which economic activity may have continued in Palestine under Babylonian rule. Graham argues that the poorest of the land became vinedressers and ploughmen (2 Chron 26:10; 2 Kings 25:12; Jer 52:16 & Isa 61:5). Archaeological evidence suggests continued agricultural activity in Palestine after the exile. The extent of produce are, of course, hard to estimate, but it is certain that the poor who had been left behind in the land did continue to make a living (Richards 1994:267), as the soil and climate were suitable for vineyards and olive orchards (Grabbe 1992:121-122).

It is unlikely that before Jerusalem and other towns flourished, much trade took place. This is because the cities served as important agricultural markets for the peasant farmers (Grabbe 1992:116-118). The one hint of international trade involving Judah (Ezekiel 27) indicates exclusively agricultural products. This suggests that handicrafts and other products of skilled workers did not play an important part in the Judean economy at this time, although such forms of trade existed in Jerusalem, if not elsewhere (Grabbe 1992:116-

118). Similarly, Blenkinsopp argues that there was a damage to trade ‘following on the destruction of Jerusalem and most of the larger towns, loss of the skilled artisan class, and a decrease in productivity due to the disappearance or takeover of the larger holdings and estates’ (Blenkinsopp 1988:66).

An interesting assumption, that in the absence of a centralised and institutional cult, the peasants were not heavily exploited in terms of tribute and royal tax, can be made. Given that Samaria was still the administrative centre of Palestine during the exile, there must have been some taxation, but without a temple in Jerusalem, the amounts demanded of peasants would not have been as severe (Richards 1994:267). The tax system may also have tended to create specialisation in crops which could be sold for cash rather than grown for the subsistence of the residents, but grain production would have been low in any case and may have been insufficient for the needs of the people themselves (Grabbe 1992:121-122).

e **Conclusion**

We need to recall that though some of the poor of the land (עַם הָאָרֶץ) took over land which initially belonged to the now exiled landlords, these people were still subjected to taxes by the Babylonians. They would still borrow seed at a high interest rate, which had to be repaid back irrespective of a threatening drought. Furthermore, we also need to realise that not all of the poor of the land became property owners, as most of the properties would have certainly been grabbed by the Babylonian invaders. So we may safely conclude that though some of the עַם הָאָרֶץ became property owners the majority of them remained poor and oppressed. Having discussed the socio-economic conditions of the עַם הָאָרֶץ, we now move on to discuss their religious conditions.

3 **Religious Conditions**

In this section we analyse the implications of the destruction of the temple, the city and an end to the Davidic monarchy for the spiritual life of the עַם הָאָרֶץ. So in this section we want to find out whether the destruction of the temple resulted in total standstill of all religious activities in Palestine. When the Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 B.C, the damage done in the spiritual realm was perhaps even worse. The destruction of the temple, and the city of Jerusalem, built on Mount of Zion and the loss of the Davidic dynasty touched the very heart of Israel’s national religion (Wittenberg 1993:98). In the next section we closely look at how each of these three issues affected the עַם הָאָרֶץ.

a **The loss of temple, city, dynasty**

First of all, there was a loss of the temple. The temple was razed, the altar was destroyed and vessels for worship were taken away to Babylonia (Ezra 1:7; Van Zyl et al. 1979:197). The temple was burnt (II Kings 25:9); the bronze pillars,

furniture and ‘sea’ were smashed (v. 13) and the bronze itself removed. It has often been assumed that the ark, too, was destroyed. Nothing is said of the altar, and it is sometimes simply assumed that it remained in position. Jones comments that ‘It would have required a deliberate act of demolition, for it was as solid as the walls of the city’ (Ackroyd 1968:25ff.). However, we all know that the walls of the city were, in fact, pulled down (Ackroyd 1968:25ff.). This meant that the temple, which had been the centre of religious activity, was now destroyed. Jerusalem had served as the centre of civic life but now it lay in ruins (Wood 1970:377; Drane 2005:174ff.). At the same time the priesthood which had the technical knowledge and skills essential to the administration of the cult in Jerusalem were in exile (Lemche 1988:178).

The main reason why the destruction of the temple threw both the עַם הָאָרֶץ and the Babylonian Jews into spiritual crisis is their understanding of the role of the temple in their worship life. The people believed that Yahweh had chosen this temple as his eternal dwelling place. The temple, as God’s house was the centre of all worship. No worship was possible without the temple. But now it had gone up in flames. What did the possible destruction of Yahweh’s own temple mean? Was Yahweh really God if the heathen god Marduk, the god of Nebuchadnezzar, had been victorious? Was Marduk the real god, the world god of power, rather than Yahweh who could not even protect his own temple from the destruction? (Wittenberg 1993:98; Drane 2005:174).

Secondly, the city of Jerusalem was also destroyed. The Jews’ understanding was that Yahweh had chosen Zion, and Zion was therefore the city of God. The prophets who opposed Jeremiah had told the people that it was impossible for God to reject Zion (Wittenberg 1993:98). When the people’s consciences were pricked by the preaching of Jeremiah, the prophets had calmed them saying: ‘Yahweh will do nothing, no harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine. This is the city of God. God cannot forsake his own city’ (see Jeremiah 5:12; Wittenberg 1993:99; Drane 2005:174).

Thirdly, the Davidic dynasty came to an end with the deportation of Jehoiachin. According to the prophecy of Nathan, God had established the Davidic dynasty on its throne and it would rule forever (see 2 Samuel 7). So people were asking questions such as: How could Yahweh go against his own promises? How could he allow his own chosen king to be defeated by unbelievers? (Wittenberg 1993:99; Drane 2005:174).

The loss of temple, city, dynasty, and even their own land threw Israel into the deepest spiritual crisis of its history (Wittenberg 1993:99). The spiritual crisis called for different interpretations of these events, in the next section we highlight two of such interpretations.

b Interpretations of the destruction of city, monarchy and temple

The political catastrophe of 587 was interpreted differently by different groups (Albertz 1994:376). Firstly, for Jeremiah and small groups of the reform party it meant liberation, relief and confirmation of their prognosis, and precisely for that reason they could recognise and acknowledge it as Yahweh's just judgment upon Judah (Jer 37:3-40:6, Albertz 1994:376; Drane 2005:176; Leclerc 2007:281).

Wittenberg also elaborates,

We need to note that Jeremiah had already questioned this combination of religion and patriotism. He had warned that Yahweh could reject his own dwelling place if there was no justice. Yahweh would break down what he himself had built and would tear up what he himself had planted. There were therefore no grounds for religious security. But this message was much too radical for the people and the religious leaders to accept. What Jeremiah said was in conflict with all their most treasured religious values and beliefs. So when disaster struck, the people were totally unprepared for it (Wittenberg 1993:99).

Secondly, for the majority of those with a nationalistic religious orientation, however, who to the end had hoped for a miraculous deliverance, it represented total political failure and the collapse of their theological picture of the world. For the city which they had regarded within the framework of Zion theology as being indispensable (Lam 4:12) had been conquered; the temple in which they had seen Yahweh himself as being present (2:1) had been devastated and desecrated by the heathens (1:10); and the king who had seemed to guarantee them life and security (4:20) had been deported and executed (Albertz 1994:376; Drane 2005:175ff.).

Furthermore, Albertz explains that a feeling of dull despair spread amongst most of the עַם הָאָרֶץ:

They felt that they had been struck by an inexplicable blow of fate which put in question everything that had been handed down to them by priests, temple prophets and court theologians as the foundation of official belief in Yahweh (Albertz 1994:376).

The struggle over a theological interpretation of the political catastrophe was addressed through worship. In the next section we discuss exilic worship in Palestine.

c Exilic worship

One crucial point at which there was a struggle to find an appropriate way of dealing theologically with the political catastrophe was exilic worship (Albertz

1994:378-9). In spite of the complete destruction of Jerusalem, Stern (1982:229) has found archaeological evidence to support the claim that life continued in Jerusalem. Noth and Janssen, in a similar way, suggest that the exiles were a mere outpost, while the real nucleus of Israel remained in Palestine and authored the Deuteronomic history (Smith 1989:32-35; Richards 1994:264).

If Noth and Janssen are correct, there is good ground for considering that there was among those who remained behind, a prolific group of writers and, more importantly, a zealous group of faithful worshippers of God. This is particularly important in the light of the fact that there were others among the remaining population who interpreted the exile as punishment for Josiah's anti-syncretistic actions (Smith 1989:32-35).

Gottwald lends some credibility to the idea of a continued worship in Palestine:

In fact, the prevailing assumption that most of the creative religious initiatives of this period arose among the Babylonian exiles is highly dubious. That assumption is especially questionable because the deported leaders of Judah had been antipathetic to the Deuteronomic reform circles and to the prophets who denounced their revolt against the Babylonians. All in all, it seems likely that the Palestinian survivors would have been quicker than the Babylonian exiles to come to terms with the political and cultural debacle by adopting the Deuteronomistic and prophetic interpretations of its causes and lessons and to devote themselves to a Yahwist-oriented communal reconstruction (Gottwald 1985:425).

Thus, it has been generally held that some form of worship (e.g. services of fasting and penitence) continued on the site of the ruined temple in Jerusalem (Jer 41:5; Hinson, 1973:153; Blenkinsopp, 1988:61ff.; Ackroyd, 1968:25ff.; Gottwald, 1985:424; Wittenberg 1993:101; Richards 1994:265; Miller and Hayes 2006:487; Leclerc 2007:280). Pilgrims, some of them from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria, thus the former Kingdom of Israel, Jer 41:5), came to Jerusalem to bring their offerings (Van Zyl et al. 1979:197; Gottwald 1985:424; Richards 1994:265; Miller and Hayes 2006:487).

What format or structure did the worship take in Palestine at this time? It is held that Lamentations could have been composed for recital as part of a liturgy carried out *in situ* (Blenkinsopp 1998:25-26; Albertz 1994:378-9). In these services community laments must have played an important role. People sang about their grief and prayed to God for forgiveness (Wittenberg 1993:101; Miller and Hayes 2006:487). The books of Lamentations, Psalms 79, 105-6 and Zechariah 7:2-7; 8:18-19 tell us that fasting was proclaimed to commemorate the catastrophic events of Jerusalem's capture and destruction by Babylon (Richards 1994:265; cf. Wittenberg 1993:101). According to Zechariah 7:1-6,

people could only mourn and fast for 70 years after the destruction of the city (Wittenberg 1993:99-101).

Furthermore, the author of Lamentations interprets the situation of distress by relating it to Yahweh in theological terms. According to him it was not a blind stroke of destiny, nor the military power of Babylon, but rather it was Yahweh himself who destroyed Jerusalem, the temple and the monarchy (Lam 2:1-10; 4:11-16). He goes on to take up notions and formulations from Zion theology and kingship theology and seeks to show how Yahweh in his wrath has himself shattered the foundations of this world of theological ideas: he has destroyed his throne on Zion (Lam 2:1); annulled the claim to world rule (Lam 1:1; 2:15) and the impregnability (Lam 4:12) of the city of God; rejected his sanctuary and its worship (Lam 2:6); and cast his kingship to the ground (Lam 2:2.; Lam 4:20; cf. Ps 89; Albertz 1994:378). So, according to this author, the loss of temple, city and dynasty was God's judgement on the people's sins (1:5, 8, 22; Albertz, 1994:378).

Even after the end of the exile it was still customary to commemorate the most important dates of the collapse of the state by holding four public liturgies of fasting a year: the beginning of the siege in the tenth month, the breaching of the wall in the fourth month, the devastation of the temple and palace in the fifth month, and the murder of Gedaliah in the seventh month (Zech 7:2ff.; 8:18ff.). Thus this occasional form of worship, which even in the pre-exilic period was not necessarily tied to a holy place, became the element which supported the regular main cult in the exilic period (Albertz 1994:378-9). The main cult of the exilic period differed from that of the monarchy essentially in the fact that it was no longer under royal supervision. That made it more open, a forum to which the various groups could contribute their own theological ideas. This becomes evident among other things from the fact that alongside the normal genre of lamentation of the people (Pss 44; 60; 74 [?]; 79; 89; Isa 51:9f; 63:7-64:11; Lam 5) other genres were used in the ceremonies of popular lamentation, like free elegaic poems in the style of the lament for the dead (Lam 1; 2; 4), compositions mediating between the main cult and the subsidiary cult (Lam 3; Ps 102), or even collections of prophetic judgments (e.g. Jer 8:4-10:24). Only through this greater institutional openness could the exilic liturgy become the place of theological clarification in the situation of political crisis (Albertz 1994:378-9).

Scholars have debated whether there was sacrifice performed in Palestine during this period. Richards maintains that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were engaged in some form of worship and sacrifice in Jerusalem prior to the arrival of the exiles (Richards 1994:265), though there is uncertainty about the exact type of sacrificial acts performed at the site of the altar at the temple ruins (Richards 1994:265). Albertz says that vegetable offerings and incense offerings could also have been made there (Jer 41:5; Albertz 1994:378-9). We also

hear of a group of pious Northerners, eighty strong, who were murdered at Mizpah while on their way with cereal offerings and incense to the temple of Yahweh, presumed to be the one in Jerusalem (Jer 41:5; Blenkinsopp 1998:25-26).

Certain scholars argue that even animal sacrifices took place during this period.

Thus, Gottwald argues,

This worship may well have included animal sacrifices presided over by lower orders of priests who had escaped deportation (Gottwald 1985:424).

But there are those scholars who are very critical of any suggestion that animal sacrifice ever took place in Palestine at this time. They argue that because the temple was destroyed all ordinary worship services, especially sacrifices, came to an end (Wittenberg 1993:99; Smith 1989:32-35). Albertz, while believing that cereal offering may have taken place at the ruins of the temple, maintains that there were 'no animal offerings, since the site would have had to be cultically pure for them' (Albertz 1994:378-9). Jones suggests that the theology which emerged in a context of a destroyed Jerusalem can in fact be called an anti-temple or non-temple piety that was outside of sacrifice. The logic of Jones' argument is that sacrifice must have ceased in order for this kind of piety to emerge (Richards 1994:265). While Jones' theory is attractive, it must be said that an anti-temple theology does not necessarily presuppose the absence of a temple. The temple was a symbol of oppression for the poorest of the land in terms of tax extraction and it is conceivable that they, therefore, had an anti-temple theology while having a physical temple building (Richards 1994:266).

D CONCLUSION

In this paper I have discussed the religious and socio-economic conditions of the עַם הָאָרֶץ. I have argued that the עַם הָאָרֶץ were Israelites who were left behind when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah in 586 B.C. Although they were in the majority, the עַם הָאָרֶץ were poor. They continued to be farmers, though the majority lost their property due to the redistribution plan of the Babylonians. It was shown that, though the destruction of the temple, city and the dynasty had caused a serious spiritual and socio-economic crisis, the עַם הָאָרֶץ continued to worship God and to offer certain offerings at the site of the ruined temple. We have also argued that if this is indeed the case, then the returned exiles could not justify the exclusion of the עַם הָאָרֶץ from the rebuilding of both the temple and the city walls on the basis that the עַם הָאָרֶץ did not worship the same God as they (the returned exiles) did.

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