

FROM
REHOVOAM
TO
NEHEMIAH

Hadret Mizrahi

*Sooner or later God collects all debts.
When He does, even the mighty are doomed.*

Rabbi Berel Wein

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Foreword

The history of the First and Second Jewish Commonwealth (10 cent. BCE - 1 cent. CE) is well known from the Tanakh¹ and extra-Biblical sources - Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, Roman. Many historians, archaeologists, researchers, religious writers, wrote books and articles about this period.

Some scholars dispute the historical veracity of Tanakh, and others claims that everything written in it is true. Both groups have their arguments.

But these disputations, as interesting they may be, miss the point. Tanakh is exceptional book not because it is historically correct. Its messages of universal morality, respect to other people's life, property, family and good name, to the nature and the earth, are still live and important. Here is its real value. The books of Tanakh are replete with ethics, wisdom, psychology, philosophy, poetry.

And of course, history.

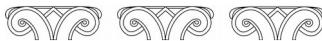
History is made by people with their personal notions, abilities, flaws and strengths. Not always had Kings and rulers

¹ The Bible. The name TaNaKh is acronym of Torah-Neviim-K'tuvim, Torah-Prophets-Writings. It contains 24 books. The Jewish sages have fixed the contents in the last centuries before Common era. Under "Bible" I refer to the Jewish Tanakh, the original set of 24 books.

act in responsible and reasonable way. Wars have been started for emotional or irrational reasons like vengeance, affront, bravado. Historical events are, so to say, the top of the iceberg, the visible result of people's deeds. In order to better understand the events and their meaning, it would be sensible first to know the people behind them.

The ancient texts of Tanakh present every situation in life. Ordeals, family relations, enemies and friends, piety and idolatry, dignity and dishonor, everything is there.

The stories of Solomon, Rehoboam, Sennacherib, Hezekiah, Nebuchadrezzar, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, teach lessons of human psychology. They reveal the patterns of attitude. None of these people is completely good or bad. Instead of judging them, let's try to understand them.



Part I

The end of the First Jewish Commonwealth

Eleventh and tenth centuries BCE in the Near East were relatively calm. There were no large and expansionist empires in the region. This geopolitical vacuum allowed the newly formed Jewish Kingdom to survive for several centuries.

According to the Bible, at the end of tenth century BCE King Rehoboam, the successor and son of King Solomon, raised the taxation of the northern tribes². They seceded and formed the Kingdom of Israel. Thus David's united Kingdom of Judah and Israel was divided due to his grandson's improvidence.

Why did Rehoboam do this way? Indeed, he was very young, but where his arrogance came from? The Bible says his father Solomon was a wise man: "Now King Solomon transcended all the Kings of the earth in affluence and wisdom."³ Maybe the paradoxical reason for Rehoboam's inadequate behavior lies in his father's wisdom?

I Kings 11 tells that Solomon's many women "turned away his heart after other gods", God became angry to him and tore the Kingdom. This view is religiously convincing, but

² I Kings 12

³ I Kings 10/23

where did the wisdom of Solomon go in his old age? Did he become senile?

There is another explanation of his idolatry. Solomon was trapped in his own wisdom. The King understood perfectly clear that his wives' gods are false. He built high places out of love and affection to his girls, for their entertainment. They did not convert to Judaism, and Torah probably seemed too harsh to them. He wanted to make them feel good in Jerusalem and pampered them. A man in love can do great things for his beloved. So did Solomon. Their funny deities meant nothing to him, and he was sure God knew his true attitude. Thus his heart "turned away" - not as much after foreign "gods", and rather after his wives. But in his wisdom he underestimated the effect of the high places on common people's minds. They took the high places seriously and thought to themselves that since their brilliant King worships there, it is safe and good for them to do the same.

An argument against this explanation: if Solomon could not foresee the effect of his deeds on the common people, then he was not so wise as the Bible states.

But who is wise enough to encompass and comprehend everything, particularly when his heart is involved? Solomon was brilliant in theology and everything related to God and the Torah, he wrote the Proverbs and

Koheleth⁴. He was wise enough to build the Temple and the walled fortresses throughout Judah, to achieve peace for his country without waging wars, to manage copper mines with due logistics and specialists. And his weak point was the women, as his father's.

Solomon made a big mistake, but how many Kings did not make mistakes due to human weaknesses? Sennacherib destroyed and leveled Babylon, because he was unable to control his anger when the Elamites killed his son. The great builder Pharaoh Necho II totally miscalculated the strength of Chaldeans out of royal arrogance, and was bitterly defeated by them. Nebuchadrezzar II fell prey to his pride and self-aggrandizement. The examples are many.

Next, Solomon ruled a relatively insignificant Kingdom. He may have been smart statesman in Judah, but he was no match to the big players, the rulers of Assyria and Egypt. The Kings of large countries have big ideas and high goals. And all Judean Kings from Saul to Zedekiah show the mentality of provincial governors, with one exception - King David. Only he had the vision and sense of his great mission to establish the

4 Some scholars argue that Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) reflects the Greek philosophy and therefore it must have been written much later, in the fourth or third century BCE. I don't support this view. Kohelet is not conventional, main-stream Jewish book. It shows the observations and reflections of a wise man, which are in no way contrary to the Torah. The opposite is true. Kohelet is unusual Judaism, and yet Judaism.

just, exemplary society, described in the Torah.

Undoubtedly Prince Rehoboam was strongly influenced by his father. When the time came, he inherited the Kingdom of Solomon, but not his exceptional intellect. He was unable to attain his father's wisdom. For Rehoboam, the high places were given. This is how idolatry became permanent evil in Judah even to the end of the Kingdom in 586 BCE.

At the beginning of ninth century BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire arose like phoenix from the ashes, and again became a major regional power, threatening neighboring city-states and Kingdoms. Assyrian King Shalmaneser III (859-824 BCE) proved himself to be strong and capable ruler who greatly extended the empire in his 35 military campaigns. In 842-841 BCE he brought under tribute Aramean King Hazael of Damascus, Jehu of Israel and the Kings of Tyre and Sidon. On his famous Black obelisk, he inscribed:

“Hazael of Aram trusted in the mass of his troops, mustered his armies in great numbers ... In Damascus (*Dimash-qi*), his royal city, I shut him up. His orchards I cut down. I advanced as far as Mount Hauran⁵. Countless cities I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire. Their spoil, without number, I carried off ... At that time I received the tribute of the

⁵ East of lake Kinneret

men of Tyre, Sidon and of Jehu, son of Omri (*lahu-mar-Humri*).”⁶

Then almost hundred years of Assyrian civil wars and stagnation followed, which allowed the temporary recovery of the neighboring countries. But Assyria was alive. An ambitious army general (probably of royal blood), called Pulu, became King under the name Tiglath-pileser III (744-727). Pulu was good soldier and smart administrator. He divided the large provinces into smaller parts and appointed local governors, who were personally loyal and responsible to him. Thus, he managed to quell many small local insurgencies in quick and effective way at their very beginning. New postal offices were installed along the roads; the correspondence from and to the capital Kalhu (Nimrud) improved significantly.

Pulu reformed the Assyrian military machine. He established the first professional standing army in history. His soldiers were highly motivated, well armed and well paid.

Soon the favorable results of his reforms followed. Assyria defeated its arch-enemy Babylon, conquered Urartu, Medes, Elamites, Hittites and many other peoples and tribes. The spoils and tributes, flowing to the capital Kalhu and the main cities Nineveh, Assur, Arbela, Arrapha, were abundant.

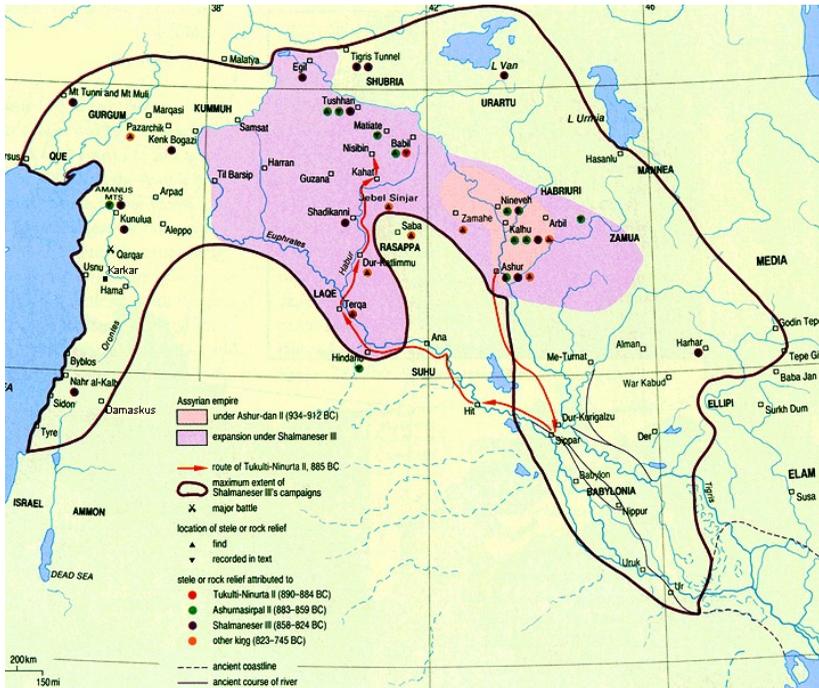
⁶ Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol.1, p.243

The King was merciless to those who opposed him. When he conquered enemy lands, he deported part of the population and settled in their place people from other lands.

The annals of Tiglath-pileser III were discovered in Kalhu (Nimrud) by Sir Austen Henry Layard in 1845. The King describes his military campaigns.

"The Arameans, as many as there were, I brought within the border of Assyria and set my official over them as governor... This tribe of Pukudu and the city of Lahiru of Idibirina, the cities of Hillimu and Pillutu, which are on the border of Elam, I brought inside the Assyrian border and placed them under the authority of my official, the viceroy of Arrapha. All the people there ... I deported and settled in Assyria. Sarrabani I took by means of earthworks and siege engines. 55,000 of its people, together with their possessions, his spoil, his property and goods, his wife, his sons and his daughters, and his gods, I carried off... The cities of Tarbasu and laballu I captured. 30,000 of their people, together with their possessions, their property, their goods and their gods, I carried off... Provinces of the mighty Medes I overpowered as with a net, to their farthest border. I slew large numbers of their inhabitants. 65,000 people, together with their possessions, their horses, their mules, their camels, their cattle and their sheep, in countless numbers, I carried off... People of the

lands my hands had conquered I settled in them. My official set over them as governor¹⁷



Assyrian empire in ninth century BCE
(by Michael Palomino, 2010)

Many people were re-settled. It was official state policy of the Assyrians to swap large groups of population between conquered lands. Thus they reduced the possibility of future rebellions. The Kings of large empires managed many peoples

¹⁷ Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol.1, p. 284-286

and tribes who had different religions, languages, culture, traditions, way of life. Many wise rulers knew that it was impossible to keep all these people calm (i.e. peacefully working and paying taxes) for a long time. The national feelings of conquered people often kindled armed resistance and wars for independence. The imperial army was unable to cover all regions constantly. Recruiting more soldiers was not a solution. Every army is insatiable consumer of resources. Bigger army would need much larger civilian base of workers, producing silver, food, weapons, building materials, etc.

Therefore the Kings conquered more and more new lands, rich of new resources. Sometimes they even tried to replace the local chauvinism with a higher, common cause.

Assyrians did the first and tried the second. They made efforts to create a homogeneous (as far as it was possible) population with common, Assyrian self-consciousness. One of the main purposes of the deportations and forcible mixing of peoples was blurring their differences and make them one, Assyrian population. Several inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II are indicative. Tiglath-pileser III: "...I settled them, I brought them into agreement with one another, and counted them with the people of Assyria."⁸

⁸ Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol.1, p. 270

Sargon II: "The people of Gurgum, to its farthest border, I pardoned once more, and my official I set as governor over them. As Assyrians I counted them."⁹

In 743 BCE Phoenicia, Aram, Israel, Gaza formed new anti-Assyrian alliance. Tiglath-pileser III marched southwest and subdued them. King Menahem of Israel became his vassal and paid large tribute.

"...the wide land of Naphtaly, in its entirety, I brought within the border of Assyria. My official I set over them as governor. Hanunu of Gaza fled before my weapons and escaped to Egypt. The city of Gaza I captured, his goods, his possessions, his gods I carried away... As for Menahem, terror overwhelmed him; like a bird, alone he fled and submitted to me. To his place I brought him back ... and silver, colored woolen garments, linen garments, I received as his tribute."¹⁰

In 732 BCE Assyrian King came to Israel again. He was informed of the new alliance between Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel. The retribution was severe.

"The land of Bit-Humria (*House of Omri*) ...and all of its people, together with their goods, I carried off to Assyria. Pakaha their King they deposed, and I placed Ausi over them

9 Ibid., Vol.2, p. 13

10 Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol.1, p. 293

as King. Ten talents of gold, ... talents of silver, as their tribute I received from them and to Assyria I carried them."¹¹

Shortly before, King Ahaz of Judah who was Assyrian vassal, was threatened by the united forces of Pekah and Rezin. King Ahaz sent gold and silver to Tiglath-Pileser and begged for help. This came as good occasion for the Assyrian King; he attacked and plundered both Aram and Israel.

The destruction of Rezin and Pekah in 732 BCE was fulfillment of the famous Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah.¹²

The Bible continues:

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² King Ahaz was in a dangerous situation. Aram and Israel were much stronger than Judah. Rezin and Pekah urged Ahaz to join their alliance, but he was afraid of Tiglath-pileser and refused. Then they marched with their armies against Jerusalem. This is the time when prophet Isaiah came and said to King Ahaz: "Feel secure and calm yourself, do not fear, and let your heart not be faint because of these two smoking stubs of firebrands, because of the raging anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah (*Pekah*). Since Aram planned harm to you, [along with] Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, saying: 'Let us go up against Judah and provoke it, and annex it to us; and let us crown a King in its midst, one who is good for us,' So said HaShem God, Neither shall it succeed, nor shall it come to pass." (Isaiah 7/4-7). But Ahaz was still afraid and hesitant, so the prophet added: "Therefore, HaShem, of His own, shall give you a sign; behold, the young woman is with child, and she shall bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah, 7/14). Christian scholars argue that this prophecy is about Jesus. But this is incorrect. It's unthinkable that Isaiah, while talking of the serious military danger upon Judah, would disrespect and offend the King by prophesy of someone who will be born after 700 years. Second, the original Hebrew word in 7/14 is *alma* (young woman), and not *betula* (virgin). Next, the prophet says "*ha-alma harah*" - "THE young woman is with child." That is to say, she was their contemporary and they knew who she was. The prophecy was said in specific historical background and had concrete meaning: Isaiah simply promised that King's enemies will soon be destroyed, and it happened in 732 BCE, during the reign of King Ahaz.

"In the days of Pekah the King of Israel, Tiglath-pileser the King of Assyria came and took Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, the entire land of Naphtali; and he exiled them to Assyria."¹³

The inscription of Tiglath-pileser III doesn't specify the number of Israeli deportees. Probably Assyrians exiled part of the royal elite, the priesthood and skilled artisans, as was the usual custom of the time.

In 723 BCE, nine years after the destruction of Pekah, King Hoshea of Israel, who was Assyrian vassal, appointed by Tiglath-pileser III, refused to pay the tribute to his son Shalmaneser V (726-722 BCE). In 722 Assyrians came back, arrested King Hoshea, put him in prison, besieged his capital Samaria and took it.

This was the end of Israel. It became Assyrian province. Large part of the population was exiled.

The Tanakh reports:

"And the King of Assyria found conspiracy in Hoshea, that he sent messengers to So¹⁴, the King of Egypt, and did not pay tribute to the King of Assyria as year by year, and the

13 II Kings 15/29

14 Or Siwa. The identification of this Pharaoh is problematic because Egypt was not unified Kingdom in that time. "Rather, it was broken up into a number of *nomes*, each ruled over by a local ruler" (*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.52, 1993). "So" could be Tefnakht (724-711), who ruled from Sais, or Osorkon (730-712) of Tanis. But whoever "So" was, he didn't support King Hoshea of Israel.

King of Assyria arrested him and confined him in prison. And the King of Assyria went up through the entire land, and he went up to Samaria and besieged it three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the King of Assyria took Samaria and exiled the Israelites to Assyria, and he repatriated them in Halah, and in Habor, the Gozan River, and the cities of Media"¹⁵

When Sargon II (721-705) sat on the throne, several Assyrian provinces, including Israel, rebelled again. Sargon quelled the riot and deported to Assyria another substantial part of the population.

In his inscription on the walls of Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad) Sargon II wrote:

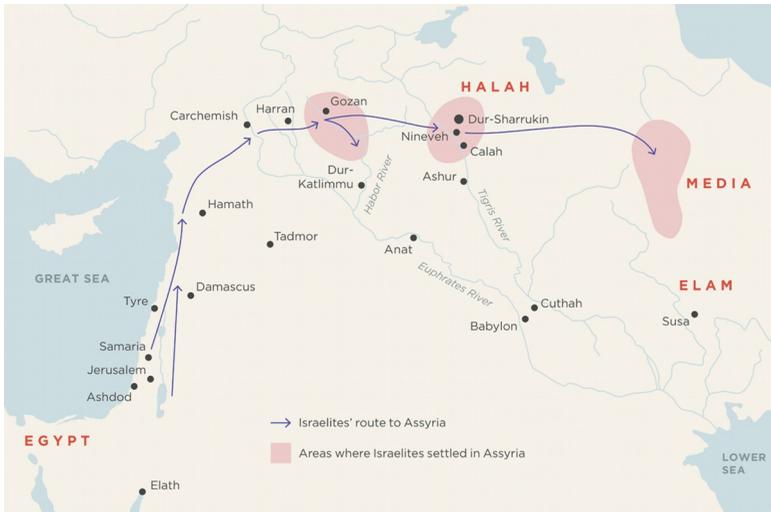
"In the beginning of my rule, in my first year of reign ... Samerinai (*the people of Samaria*) ... 27,290 people, who lived therein, I carried away. 50 chariots for my royal equipment, I selected among them... The city [of Samaria] I rebuilt, I made it greater than it was before. People of the lands my hand had conquered, I settled therein. My official I placed over them as governor. Tribute, tax, I imposed upon them as upon Assyrians ... I mixed [them] together."¹⁶

"The tribes of Tamud, Ibadid, Marsimanu and Haiapa, distant Arabs who inhabit the desert, who know neither high

¹⁵ II Kings 17/4-6

¹⁶ Hugo Winckler, *Die Keilschrifttexte Sargons*. 1889

nor low official (governor), with the weapon of Assur, my lord, I struck them down, the remnant of them I deported and settled them in Samaria."¹⁷



Deportation of Israel to Assyria (commons.wikimedia.org)

Assyrians never deported population *en masse*. Instead, they carefully selected the people for their specific abilities and deported them to regions which could make the most of their talents.

"The deportees, their labor and their abilities were extremely valuable to the Assyrian state, and their relocation was carefully planned and organized. We must not imagine

¹⁷ *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol.2, p.7

treks of destitute fugitives who were easy prey for famine and disease: the deportees were meant to travel as comfortably and safely as possible in order to reach their destination in good physical shape. Whenever deportations are depicted in Assyrian imperial art, men, women and children are shown traveling in groups, often riding on vehicles or animals and never in bonds. There is no reason to doubt these depictions as Assyrian narrative art does not otherwise shy away from the graphic display of extreme violence."¹⁸

People were sent to Assyria with their wives, children and possessions; the families were not separated. Stonecutters, carpenters, blacksmiths, armorers, strong men, participated in the endless Assyrian building projects. The general populace of conquered lands was left to live there and was considered as Assyrians. It was the proper way to do. In antiquity people were much lesser in numbers, and the minority of skilled artisans and workers was esteemed and protected.

But let's not be misguided. Discovered inscriptions on buildings and tablets rarely depict slaves. The whole Assyrian (also Egyptian, Babylonian, Hittite, Persian, etc.) empire was founded on the extremely cheap slave labor. Without it, there would never be ziggurates, palaces and houses of priests,

18 Karen Radner, *Ancient Assyria*, Oxford University Press, 2015

high rank officials, generals and merchants; aqueducts, canals, paved roads, plantations and gardens. The mighty Assyrian army could not exist without slaves. Neo-Assyrian Kings were devoted builders, and new workers were permanently needed. Military campaigns and conquests of new lands were the main source of "animated objects", and huge slave markets worked constantly.

When Sargon II died in 705 BCE, the neighbors of Assyria expected that his heir Sennacherib (705-681) would not be a match to his mighty father and his grand-father Tiglath-pileser III. But they were deadly wrong. Already in his first military campaign the new King vanquished Babylon and appointed Assyrian governor. The popular opinion of Sennacherib as cruel butcher and conqueror is one-sided. He was complex and talented man: strong ruler, brilliant military tactician, wise administrator and devoted builder. As for his cruelty, every King and warlord of the time were cruel. There were no mercy or respect to other people.

In his second military campaign Sennacherib marched again to Babylon. The King conquered the city, but paid a high price in people and resources. On top of all, his son was killed. Sennacherib was furious. Out of himself of rage, he literally wiped Babylon out from the face of the earth.

In the royal annals, discovered by Robert Taylor in 1830 at Nineveh, we read Sennacherib's words:

"I completely invested that city ... I left none. With their corpses I filled the city squares. The wealth of that city - silver, gold, precious stones, property and goods, I doled out to my people and they made it their own. The gods dwelling therein, my people took them and smashed them. Their property and goods they seized ... The city and its houses, from its foundation to its top, I destroyed... The wall and outer wall, temples and gods, temple towers of brick and earth, I razed and dumped them into the Arahtu canal. Through the midst of that city I dug canals, I flooded its ground with water, and the very foundations thereof I destroyed. I made its destruction more complete than that by a flood. That in days to come the site of that city, and its temples and gods, might not be remembered, I completely blotted it out with water and made it like a meadow."¹⁹

After the successful campaigns against Babylon, Chaldea and Kassites in Southern Mesopotamia, Sennacherib raided the Hittites, Phoenicia and the Philistine city-states. The Egyptian army tried to stop him in the battle of Eltekeh²⁰, but was defeated.

19 *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol.2, p.152

20 Near modern Yavne in Israel

"As for Hezekiah, the Jew (*Ha-za-qi-ia-u la-u-da-ai*), who had not submitted to my yoke, forty six of his strong, walled cities and the cities of their environs, which were numberless, I besieged, I captured, I plundered, as booty I counted them. Him, like a caged bird, in *Ur-sa-li-im-mu*, his royal city, I shut up. Earthworks I threw up about it. His cities which I plundered, I cut off from his land and gave to the Kings of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron and Gaza; I diminished his land."²¹

In 701 BCE Sennacherib conquered all Judean walled cities except Jerusalem. He took and destroyed Lachish, one of the strongest Judean citadels. The Bible adds: "Hezekiah the King of Judah sent to the King of Assyria to Lachish, saying, 'I have sinned, withdraw from me; whatever you impose upon me, I will bear'. And the King of Assyria imposed upon Hezekiah, King of Judah, three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold."²²

This information is telling. One talent was equivalent of 3,000 shekels (Exodus 38/24), and the average weight of one shekel is 11.4 grams (0.40 oz). Hezekiah had to pay roughly 10,260 kg (361,910 oz) of silver and 1,026 kg (36,191 oz) of gold. This was a very large sum.

²¹ *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol.2, p.143

²² II Kings 18/14



Siege of Lachish. Relief from the Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.
The British Museum, London

For comparison, Omri (King of Israel, ruled c. 885 - 874 BCE) bought the mountain of Samaria for two talents of silver (I Kings 16/24).

II Chronicles 32/27 tells Hezekiah was very wealthy. Where did his riches come from? Judah was agricultural country with no valuable resources. An interesting theory explains Hezekiah's wealth with his religious reform.

“Whilst the biblical writers present Hezekiah's reformation program as motivated solely by piety and righteousness, the preceding discussion has shown that it ultimately benefited him sociopolitically, strategically and, more importantly, economically. It gave Hezekiah control of the entire Judean economy and directed the flow of tithes and taxes to the Temple in the capital city. Perhaps these were the

riches received from God to which the biblical writers referred in 2 Chronicles 32:27. Either way, they would definitely have constituted a major source of income for Hezekiah."²³

Then Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem and sent his low-rank official (*rab-shakeh*) to speak to the besieged defenders. His speech is impressive.

"Say now to Hezekiah, So has the great King, the King of Assyria, said, What is this confidence that you have trusted? You have said but words of the lips; counsel and might are needed for war. Now, on whom do you depend that you have rebelled against me? Now, behold you have depended upon the support of this splintered reed, upon Egypt, upon whom a man will lean and it will go into his palm and puncture it; so is Pharaoh the King of Egypt to all those who trust in him ... Have the gods of the nations saved each one his land from the hand of the King of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad, where are the gods of Sepharvaim? He exiled them and twisted them. Now, did they save Samaria from my hand? Who are they among all the gods of the lands who saved their land from my hand, that HaShem²⁴ should save Jerusalem from my hand?"²⁵

23 Gail A. Röthlin, Magdel Leroux, *Hezekiah and Assyrian Tribute*, 2013

24 Hebrew term for God. Lit. "the Name"

25 II Kings 18/19-21, 33-35

But the siege failed. According to the Bible, "an angel of HaShem went out and slew one hundred eighty-five thousand of the camp of Assyria. And they arose in the morning, and behold they were all dead corpses."²⁶

John Bright²⁷ hypothesizes that this was an epidemic, brought from Egypt.

Anyway, the number of the dead, translated in English as 185,000, is impossible. The whole army of Sennacherib numbered to 180,000 - 200,000. A loss of 185,000 soldiers would be the end of Assyria. And in Assyrian royal records we read that next year the King marched against Bit Yakin (Chaldea) and subjugated peoples, tribes and cities, as if nothing happened. Certainly the number of the dead (if any) was much lesser.²⁸

Why Sennacherib didn't take Jerusalem? Assyrians were masters of siege tactics and it would not be a big problem for them to conquer the city. Had God prevented him?

I hold the opinion that Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem in a demonstration of power. He hardly aimed to take the city: his successful third campaign was at end, the soldiers were tired, sated with booty and wanted to go home.

26 II Kings 19/35, Isaiah 37/36.

27 John Bright (1908-1995) American biblical scholar, author of *A History of Israel*, 1959

28 The issue of the impossible numbers in the Bible is treated in Part II.

Besides, the small and helpless Judah with its tiny (if any) army was not a threat at all for mighty Assyria.

Sennacherib was rather surprised than angry to Hezekiah. Therefore, after he plundered Judean walled cities, he gave some of them to the Kings of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron and Gaza. Then he demonstrated his power to Jerusalem and went home.

In his later inscription he wrote:

"I devastated the wide province of Judah; the strong, proud Hezekiah, its King, I brought in submission to my feet."²⁹

Sennacherib was sure he gave a good lesson to Judeans and didn't expect further problems from them.

And he was right: Judah was loyal Assyrian vassal throughout the reign of Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon (680-669) and his grandson Ashurbanipal (668-627).

The policy of Esarhaddon to Babylon differed from his father's. He tried to appease the hostility of Babylonians and one of his first royal decrees was restoration of the city, its temples, houses and streets. This won him the benevolence of Babylonia for several decades.

Esarhaddon managed to conquer Egypt, but this was a grave mistake. Egyptians rebelled fiercely. The King and his successor Ashurbanipal had to keep there large military

²⁹ *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol.2, p. 148

contingent which was a heavy financial burden. The Egyptian conquest turned out to be both dream come true, and one of the main reasons for the end of Assyrian empire.

In 626 BCE Chaldean chieftain Nabopolassar (626-605) took Babylon from Assyria and founded the Neo-Babylonian empire. In 620 he controlled whole Babylonia and allied with the Medes, who had just claimed their independence from Assyria. After four years of battles with the crumbling Assyrian Empire, Medes and Babylonians destroyed Nineveh in 612 BCE. The prophecy of Nahum was fulfilled.

The small Judah changed its allegiance, this time in favor to the Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) Empire. In 609 BCE Pharaoh Necho II (610-595 BCE) hurried to support his ally, the last Assyrian King Ashur-ubalit II (612-609 BCE), in latter's desperate war against Nabopolassar and Medes³⁰. King Josiah of Judah (640-609) tried to stop the Egyptians in the plain of Megiddo³¹, but was defeated. Josiah was severely wounded in the battle and died in Jerusalem. Pharaoh Necho II arrived in time, joined his Assyrian ally and both tried to recapture Harran, Ashur-ubalit's capital. In June 609 BCE they were defeated by the united armies of Chaldeans and Medes. This was the end of Neo-Assyrian Empire.

³⁰ Necho II hardly cared much of Ashur-ubalit. He rather tried to secure the Egyptian presence in Phoenicia and Aram like his ancestor Thutmose III.

³¹ About 30 km south-east of modern Haifa

When King Josiah died, his twenty-three years old son Jehoahaz³² sat on the throne of Judah. He reigned for only three months. After Harran, the Pharaoh retreated and on his way back to Egypt, he stopped in Riblah in Aram. There he called the young Judean King, arrested him and installed his half-brother Jehoiakim (ruled 609-597 BCE) as King of Judah.³³ The young Jehoahaz was taken prisoner to Egypt.

In 605 BCE the unrelenting Pharaoh Necho II tried his luck again. Supported by the remnants of the former Assyrian army, he marched to Euphrates River. The decisive battle took place in May or June nearby Carchemish.³⁴ The allied armies of Babylonians, Medes and Scythians, led by Nabopolassar's son and heir, Prince Nebuchadrezzar (634-562 BCE), defeated Necho again.

"They fought with each other and the Egyptian army withdrew before him (*Nebuchadrezzar*). He accomplished their defeat and beat them to non-existence. As for the rest of the Egyptian army which had escaped from the defeat so quickly that no weapon had reached them, in the district of Hamath the Babylonian troops overtook and defeated them so that not a single man escaped to his own country."³⁵

32 Called *Shallum* in Jer.22/11

33 II Kings 23

34 Settlement in the west bank of Euphrates, on the border of modern Turkey and Syria.

35 *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, translated by A.K.Grayson, 1975

The battle is mentioned in the Bible as well:

"...concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco King of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates in Carchemish, which Nebuchadrezzar King of Babylon smote in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, King of Judah..."³⁶

After the victories in Carchemish and Hamath, Prince Nebuchadrezzar pursued the Pharaoh by land and reached the Egyptian border. There he was informed of his father's demise and quickly returned to Babylon. According to *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, in 1 Ululu (August-September) 605 BCE, he became King under the name Nebuchadrezzar II³⁷.

The book of Daniel 1/1 reads: "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, King of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it." Further, the text tells that several young men "from the royal seed, and from the nobles" were taken to Babylon, among them Daniel. Some scholars argue that this was the first deportation of Judeans to Babylon.

According to Daniel, the siege and deportation occurred in the third year of Jehoiakim³⁸. Nebuchadrezzar II sat on the throne in 605 BCE³⁹.

36 Jeremiah 46/2

37 *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, translated by Jean-Jacques Glassner, 2004

38 April 606 - February 605. Jehoiakim ruled from 609 to 597 BCE.

39 A successor became official King in Babylon during Akitu festival in the spring. Crown Prince Nebuchadrezzar took the power in the fall of 605 (the

Most probably he was co-regent with his father Nabopollasar, and the phrase “King of Babylon” in Daniel 1/1 and Jeremiah 46/2 is correct⁴⁰.

The *Mesopotamian Chronicles* don't report any Babylonian attack of Judah and Jerusalem in 606-605 BCE.

Prince Nebuchadrezzar was too busy with Egypt and Elam; he had no time for war with the insignificant Judah. In May-June 604 BCE he attacked Ashkelon:

“In the first year of Nebuchadrezzar⁴¹ in the month of Simanu he mustered his army and went to the Hatti-land (Syria), he marched about unopposed in the Hatti-territory until the month of Kislimu. All the Kings of the Hatti-land came before him and he received their heavy tribute. He marched to the city of Ashkelon and captured it in the month of Kislimu. He captured its King and plundered it and carried off spoil from it. He turned the city into a mound and heaps of ruins and then in the month of Shabatu he marched back to Babylon.”⁴²

The destruction of mighty Ashkelon, whose King was Egyptian vassal, probably horrified Jehoiakim. There was no

fourth year of Jehoakim) and was officially proclaimed King in the spring of 604 BCE (the fifth year of Jehoakim). So either a) Daniel is incorrect with one year, or b) there was indeed deportation in 606, and the only one report for it is in Daniel 1.

40 Even though *Mesopotamian Chronicles* call him “eldest son, the crown Prince” of Nabopollasar

41 Most probably the first year of his co-regency

42 Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, 2004

need for Nebuchadrezzar to siege Jerusalem. Most likely, he sent a military unit from Babylon to Jerusalem with harsh letter to Jehoiakim, demanding his allegiance, tribute and royal hostages. King Jehoiakim obeyed. He became a Babylonian vassal and submitted golden vessels and hostages to Nebuchadrezzar. II Kings reads:

"In his days Nebuchadrezzar went up, and Jehoiakim was his vassal for three years, then he turned and rebelled against him."⁴³

Nebuchadrezzar II (ruled 605-562) was not a spoiled city-boy. From his young age his father took him to every military campaign, and when Nebuchadrezzar became King, he was experienced administrator and army commander.

King Jehoiakim was between two fires, two mighty empires, led by talented and ambitious rulers. He was Egyptian protege, appointed by the Pharaoh, and Nebuchadrezzar had legitimate *casus belli* against Judah. King Jehoiakim was in desperate, lose - lose situation. With no resources to fight, he was easy prey of his strong neighbors. Let's remember that in 701 BCE the Kingdom of Judah was severely shrunk by the Assyrian King Sennacherib. For more than a century, the small Kingdom was constantly paying

43 II Kings 24/1

heavy tributes to Assyria, Egypt or Babylon and was unable to recover.

The Bible tells that Jehoiakim “did what was evil in the eyes of HaShem, like all that his forefathers had done.”⁴⁴

But was he incompetent ruler?

The situation in Judah was gloomy. Jehoiakim inherited a tiny Kingdom with no army nor resources. When Pharaoh installed him on the throne, old court officials and counselors of his father Josiah were certainly replaced with people who supported Egypt. The only one who advised the King to be loyal to Babylon, was prophet Jeremiah.

As for Judean people, their life was tough. Heavily burdened with taxes, they tried to survive. The ruling elite and priesthood were only busy with themselves and didn't care for people's needs and hopes. Davidic dynasty has lost the support and fondness of its subjects long ago. The Temple priests were anything but spiritual leaders. Instead of teaching Torah values to people and serve as example, they skimped on the rituals and festivals⁴⁵ and enriched themselves.

The social structure of Judean society was degrading for centuries. Not surprisingly foreign deities, their high places and priests⁴⁶ were very popular. No one but a handful of

44 II Kings 23/37

45 Isaiah 1

46 For example: the 450 prophets of Baal against lonely Elijah

prophets occasionally talked of HaShem and preached justice and mercy.

The Torah was almost forgotten.

Remember how the scroll of the Law was accidentally found during Temple repairs, and how surprised was King Josiah⁴⁷ when they read it to him. Moreover this happened in the eighteenth year of the King, not on his first day, which means that for good eighteen years Josiah ruled with no knowledge of the Law whatsoever.

At the end of the First Commonwealth, Judah had no unitive cause. People despised King Jehoiakim and the ruling elite. In addition, marauding gangs of Chaldeans, Arameans, Moabites and Ammonites plundered the helpless country.

Jehoiakim had to estimate the situation wisely and realize that his only option was to listen Jeremiah.

But the King chose otherwise. In 600-599 BCE he decided to break his treaty with Babylon, stopped paying vassal tribute and asked Egypt for support. This was a fatal mistake.

One year later Nebuchadrezzar II came and besieged Jerusalem. This move was not mere punishment of an unfaithful vassal. It was part of well planned strategy against

⁴⁷ Who "did what was right in the eyes of HaShem, and he walked in all the ways of David his father, and he turned away neither right nor left" (II Kings 22/2)

Egypt, and Jehoiakim with his miscalculated revolt unwittingly helped Nebuchadrezzar.

This was Jehoiakim's last mistake; he died just before (or during) the siege of Jerusalem, and his eighteen years old son Jehoiachin became King.

"In the seventh year, the month of Kislimu⁴⁸, the King of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land⁴⁹, [then] besieged the city of Judah, and on the second day of the month of Addaru he seized the city and captured the King⁵⁰. He appointed there a King of his own choice, received its heavy tribute and sent to Babylon."⁵¹

Babylonians plundered Jerusalem and the Temple.

"... he removed from there all the treasures of the house of HaShem and the treasures of the King's palace, and he stripped off all the golden decorations that Solomon King of Israel had made in the Temple of HaShem, as HaShem had spoken. And he exiled all Jerusalem and all the officers and all the mighty warriors, ten thousand exiles, and all the craftsmen and the sentries of the gates. No one remained except the poorest of the people of the land. And he exiled Jehoiachin to Babylon, and the King's mother and the King's wives, and his

48 At the end of 599 BCE

49 In Anatolia

50 Jehoiachin

51 *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings (626-556 BCE) in the British Museum*, D.J.Wiseman, 1956

officers and the dignitaries of the land, he led in exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. And all the military men seven thousand, and the craftsmen and the gate sentries one thousand, all mighty warriors; and the King of Babylonia brought them into exile to Babylon."⁵²

Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah became King of Judah under the name Zedekiah (597-586 BCE).

Inscriptions, discovered by Robert Koldewey,⁵³ mention King Jehoiachin. Tero Alstola, who thoroughly researched these texts, reports that they record the distribution of oil rations to people of Babylonian and foreign origin around the thirteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar (592 BCE). Jehoiachin, Judean Princes and other people of Judean origin are also attested on these lists. The text reads:

"...to Ya-'-u-kin, King...

10 sila of oil to ... [Ya]--kin, King of Ya[...]

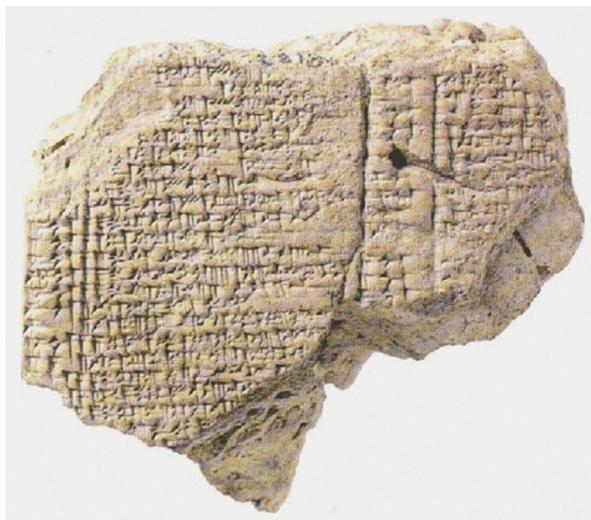
2 1/2 sila of oil to [... so]ns of the King of Ya-a-hu-du

4 sila to eight emel Ya-a-hu-da-a (*men from Judah*)..."⁵⁴

52 II Kings 24/13-16

53 Robert Koldewey (1855-1925), German architect and archaeologist. During his excavations in Babylon (1899-1917) he discovered foundations of the temple of Marduk, Ishtar gate and many tablets. In 1914 he published his book *The Excavations at Babylon*.

54 Translation: E. F. Weidner, *Jojachin, König von Juda, in babylonischen Keilschrifttexten*, 1939. Weidner published a small group of texts excavated by the German expedition in Babylon and dating from the 10th to the 35th year of Nebuchadnezzar II. The tablets list deliveries of sesame oil to hostages, prisoners of war or otherwise dependent upon the royal



Ration record from Babylon mentioning Jehoiachin. Pergamon Museum, Berlin

The new Judean King Zedekiah was not loyal vassal of Babylon, either. He lightly and openly allied with Egypt. Even prophet Ezekiel, who was then in Babylon, knew that and harshly rebuked Zedekiah:

“Then the word of HaShem came to me, saying: Say now to the rebellious house: Do you not know what these are? Say; Behold the King of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took its King and its Princes, and brought them to him to Babylon. And

household. They are identified by name, profession and nationality. The two tablets also mention, beside Judeans, inhabitants of Ashkelon, Tyre, Byblos, Arvad, Egyptians, Medes, Persians, Lydians and Greeks.

1 *sila* is about 0.800 litre (0.211 liquid gallons).

he took of the royal seed and formed a covenant with him [Zedekiah, AN], and he brought him into an oath and the mighty of the land he took away. To be a lowly Kingdom, that it might not elevate itself, to keep his covenant that it might stand. But he rebelled against him by sending his emissaries to Egypt to give him horses and many men. Will he prosper? Will one who does these escape? Can one violate a covenant and escape?"⁵⁵

The "rash and wholly irrational decision" (as Rabbi Berel Wein puts it) of King Zedekiah to rebel against Babylon and ally himself with Egypt, brought the destruction upon Judah. We may wonder why Zedekiah would make the same mistake as Jehoiakim? Didn't he remember what happened to his brother, didn't he care about the life of his nephew Jehoiachin and his family, who were held hostages in Babylon?

In Jerusalem and Judah, since the failed siege of Sennacherib in 701 BCE, many people strongly believed that God protects the city and will not allow it to fall. Oded Lipschits explains: "Among the military, political and religious leadership in Jerusalem there was a prevailing belief that Jerusalem will continue to exist peacefully and would never fall to an enemy

55 Ezekiel 17/11-15

or oppressor ... specifically at the time when caution was essential."⁵⁶

This is important note - the fanatic nationalists were among the elites. Common Judeans were indifferent to who would fleece them – the Pharaoh, Babylon or their King.

In 589 Pharaoh Psamtik II⁵⁷ died and was succeeded by his son Hophra.⁵⁸ The new Pharaoh offered alliance to King Zedekiah, and even sent military support to Judah. The patriots in Jerusalem rejoiced, but when Babylonian army approached the city, Egyptians retreated.

The books of Kings II and Jeremiah don't mention any counselors who influenced Zedekiah's decision, leaving the impression that he is the only one to blame.

But the book of Chronicles reads:

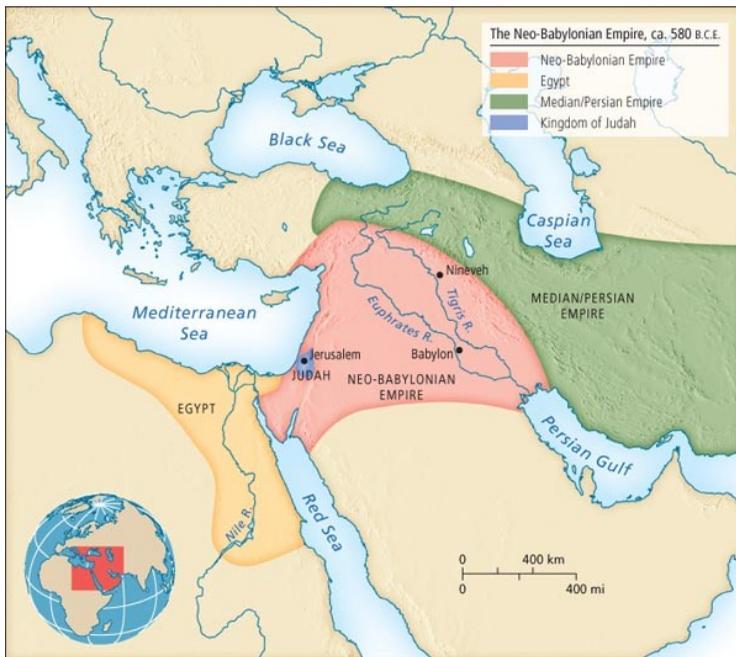
“And he also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who adjured him by God, and he stiffened his neck and strengthened his heart, not to return to HaShem God of Israel. Also, all the chiefs of the priests and the people committed many treacherous acts, like all the abominations of the nations, and they defiled the House of HaShem, which He had hallowed in Jerusalem.”⁵⁹

56 Oded Lipschits Ph.D., Professor for Jewish history in the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures, Tel Aviv University

57 Son of Necho II. Ruled 595-589 BCE

58 Known also as *Apries*. Ruled 589-570 BCE

59 II Chronicles 36/13-14



Neo-Babylonian Empire

Many times prophet Jeremiah warned the King and his officials against their misguided nationalism, but no one listened. Zedekiah was in the camp of influential chauvinists. Instead of listening to the voice of reason, he imprisoned Jeremiah as traitor. Religious madness and false patriotism led King Zedekiah and Judah to catastrophe.

Nebuchadrezzar came and besieged Jerusalem.

Still there are no Babylonian records of this siege and the fall of Jerusalem in 587 or 586 BCE.⁶⁰

Our only source of information is the Tanakh.

King Zedekiah tried to escape through a long underground tunnel, but was seized. Chaldeans killed his sons, blinded him and sent him to Babylon in chains.

The unimaginable came upon Judah.

“And in the fifth month, on the seventh of the month [that was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylonia] Nebuzaradan, chief executioner, servant of the King of Babylonia, came to Jerusalem. And he burnt the house of HaShem and the King's palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem and all the houses of the dignitaries he burnt with fire. The entire army of the Chaldeans that was [with] the chief executioner demolished the walls of Jerusalem around. And Nebuzaradan the chief executioner exiled the remnant of the people who remained in the city, and the defectors who defected to the King of Babylonia, and the rest of the populace. Now the chief executioner left over some of the poorest of the land as vine-dressers and farmers.”⁶¹

The phrase “the remnant of the people who remained in the city, and the defectors who defected to the King of

60 The exact year is still debated. Probably the siege was laid in 587, and the city fell in August 586 BCE

61 II Kings 25/8-12

Babylonia” is indicative. Nebuchadrezzar II understood the situation very well and was aware of the different groups in Judean society⁶². Nebuzaradan came a month or so after the fall of Jerusalem, because Babylonian officials needed some time to write the correct deportation lists. Only those, who were against Babylon, were exiled.

“And the rest of the populace” was either added later, or the author meant those who shared the chauvinistic fervor of their ruling elite. The majority of people were left to live in their land. Some fled to neighboring Kingdoms.

Nebuchadrezzar never planned nor wanted to deport all Judeans. Most of them were poor shepherds and farmers and it would be economically dangerous to settle them in Babylonia.

Those who remained in Judah believed that exiles are culpable for their own fate. Many of the deported were wealthy people who left behind big farms, wine- and oil presses, orchards. All this was taken by “the poorest of the land”. This act was the seed of future quarrels, hostility and division.

Gedaliah (*Gedaliyahu*) ben Achikam was appointed as governor of the new province of Judah, supported by small

62 His reconnaissance and local informers brought abundant information

Babylonian military unit. According to Oded Lipschits, this happened before the fall of Jerusalem.⁶³

When Chaldean army departed, “all the officers of the armies that were in the field heard, they and their men, that the King of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahikam in the land, and that he had appointed with him men, women and children, and of the poor of the land, of those who were not exiled to Babylon... and they came to Gedaliah to Mizpah. And Gedaliah ... swore to them and to their men, saying, Fear not to serve the Chaldeans. Dwell in the land and serve the King of Babylon, and it will go well with you.”⁶⁴

One of those who returned was Ishmael Ben Netaniah, man of royal descent, as Jeremiah 41/1 specifies. He was part of the patriotic elite, and for him Gedaliah was a traitor. Ishmael hired eight men and assassinated Gedaliah along with the Babylonian garrison.⁶⁵

A large group of Judeans, led by Johanan Ben Kareah, took prophet Jeremiah with them and fled to Egypt.



63 Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 2005.

64 Jer.40/9

65 Circa 582 BCE

Part II

Babylonian Exile

Judeans were deported in several waves⁶⁶. The first one with King Jehoiachin, was in 597 BCE. The second group was exiled in 586 BCE.

The book of Jeremiah 52/30 reports of third deportation of 745 people.

Estimations on the extent of the deportations from Judah vary. Some scholars say that only the upper classes and the skilled professionals were deported. According to Albertz⁶⁷ about 20,000 were deported. Blenkinsopp⁶⁸ argues that the number was about 4,600 (based on Jeremiah 52/30).

Until recently, there was a general agreement that after Babylonian deportations Judah remained desolated.

W.Albright wrote, "There is not a single known case where a town of Judah was continuously occupied through the exilic period."⁶⁹ Others speak of complete societal collapse.

66 Daniel and other boys from the elite were sent to Babylon as hostages already in 604-603 BCE.

67 Rainer Albertz, Professor of Old Testament at the University of Munster, Germany, author of *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century BCE*, 2003

68 Joseph Blenkinsopp, academic theologian and Old Testament scholar, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Author of *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism*, 2009

Ephraim Stern wrote, “A review of the archaeological evidence from sixth-century BCE Judah clearly reflects the literary (i.e. biblical) evidence for the complete destruction of all the settlements and fortified towns by Nebuchadnezzar II’s armies in 586 BCE.”⁷⁰

The Bible reads:

“For Mount Zion, which has become desolate; foxes prowl over it.” (Lam. 5/18)

“And Nebuzaradan the chief executioner exiled the remnant of the people who remained in the city, and the defectors who defected to the King of Babylonia, and the rest of the populace. Now the chief executioner left over some of the poorest of the land as vine-dressers and farmers.” (II Kings 25/11-12)

In fact, the Bible describes events mainly in Jerusalem. There’s no reason to extrapolate the systematic destruction and deportations which occurred in the capital, to all Judah.

Modern estimations, based on archaeological data from the last 10-15 years, correct the old views. Tero Alstola wrote: “Recent archaeological studies of Judah in the sixth century do not conform to the idea of desolate land depicted in

69 *The Archaeology of Palestine*, 1949. William Foxwell Albright (1891-1971), American archaeologist and biblical scholar

70 *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, Vol. II: The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods (732-332 B.C.E.)* by Ephraim Stern (1934-2018), Israeli archaeologist and professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

2 Chron 36, but they do not support the opposite view of strong continuity either. They show that there was a significant collapse in population, especially in the Jerusalem region, but also a continuity of settlement in the north and south of the capital. The population estimations in Judah before and after the Babylonian military actions vary, but they all attest to a major disruption: the population fell from about 110,000 to 15,000 - 40,000. Naturally this change did not result from deportations only, and two other factors are equally or even more important. First, people were killed in battles; they were executed, and the disruption of farming activities could result in severe famine. Second, many people left the land seeking refuge."⁷¹

According to Oded Lipschits, "From the demographic point of view, based on all the available archaeological data, one can estimate that, as a result of the long war and as part of its effect and outcome, there was approximately a 60 percent decline in population, from about 110,000 people to about 40,000."⁷²

Archaeologists discovered provincial settlements from the sixth century BCE with no traces of destruction or occupational gaps. For example, the excavations in Ramat

⁷¹ Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia - A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*, University of Helsinki 2017

⁷² Lipschits, "Demographic Changes in Judah," 323–79

Rachel,⁷³ in 2008-2009, directed by Oded Lipschits, show that the settlement was an important administrative center with a large palace, gardens and industrial warehouses. Built in 8-7 centuries BCE, it existed intact in the sixth century, while Jerusalem laid in ruins.

“The unique administrative nature of Ramat Rachel is best reflected in its profusion of stamped jar handles. Over 300 stamped handles from the late Iron Age [*Neo-Babylonian period. A/N*] have been found at the site, including ‘LMLK’ [*Je-melech*, “to the King”, *A/N*] and private stamp impressions (late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE); concentric circle incisions (mid-seventh century BCE), and rosette stamp impressions (late seventh to early sixth centuries BCE).”⁷⁴

Excavations in Rogem Ganim (seven kilometers west of Ramat Rachel) discovered pottery, wine-presses, storage caves and plastered cisterns, which were dated to the late Iron Age and to the Persian period.⁷⁵

The digs in Khirbet er-Ras, Beit Safafa, Tell en Nasbeh

73 Few kilometers south of Jerusalem’s Old City.

74 Lipschits, *Shedding New Light on the Dark Years of the Exilic Period: New Studies, Further Elucidation, and Some Questions Regarding the Archaeology of Judah as an “Empty Land”*, 2011.

People paid the tax in kind: wine and olive oil, which were kept in clay jars.

75 Raphael Greenberg, Gilad Cinamon, *Stamped and Incised Jar Handles from Rogem Ganim and Their Implications for the Political Economy of Jerusalem, Late 8th–Early 4th Centuries B.C.E.*, 2006

(Mizpah)⁷⁶, rural settlements in Rephaim valley and the region between Bethlehem and Beth-zur, discovered wine-presses, farms and pottery, which “attest to the existence of an unbroken tradition of pottery production in Judah from the end of the seventh to the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.”⁷⁷



Jar handle with L-M-L-K impression, found in Ramat Rachel

After the assassination of Gedaliah, new governor of Yehud/Judah was appointed. Still we don't know his name but for sure he continued to manage the province, collected the

⁷⁶ Mizpah served as *birah* (citadel) for 142 years, from 586 BCE, through the Neo-Babylonian period, until the time of Nehemiah (444 BCE)

⁷⁷ Ibid.

taxes and sent them to Babylon. Life in Judah went on without centralized religion and elite.

Meanwhile in Babylonia, part of the exiled Judean high and middle class underwent dramatic change. They had to work as farmers.

Recently excavated clay tablets, written in Akkadian cuneiform⁷⁸, show that deportees in Babylonia lived in Al-Yahudu⁷⁹, Sippar, Nippur, Opis, Susa.

"King Jehoiachin of Judah and his sons were held hostage in Babylon where some Judean professionals worked as well. A family of Judean royal merchants lived in Sippar, traded with the local temple, and was well integrated into the Sipparean community of traders. Judean farmers cultivated fields and gardens in the land-for-service sector of the Babylonian rural economy. They were granted plots of state land to cultivate and they were required to pay taxes and do work and military service in exchange."⁸⁰

"The Judeans and their West Semitic neighbours, like many other Babylonians or displaced foreigners on Babylonian soil, were granted parcels of land by the crown - commonly *bit qashti*, 'bow-fief', date gardens and grain producing fields -

78 Al-Yahudu tablets (the period from 572 to 477 BCE) and Murashu archive (from Achaemenid period)

79 *Alu sha Yahudaia* - "The city of Judah." It was agricultural settlement located in Babylon-Borsippa region, southwest of modern Baghdad.

80 Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*

which they were allowed to cultivate in lieu of service obligations (i.e. taxation), in the army, or in construction work gangs."⁸¹

It is important to note the difference between Assyrian and Babylonian policies. Assyrians dispersed the conquered peoples and re-settled them in small groups to many cities and villages. The deportees' families were alone among foreigners; they didn't (or rarely) meet their countrymen, nor celebrated national festivals. This may be one reason (if not the main) why the Ten Israeli tribes, who were exiled outside Euphrates by Tiglath-pileser III in 732 BCE, Shalmaneser V in 727 and Sargon II in 720, disappeared from history.⁸² And the rest of them, who were left to live in Samaria, have mixed with the foreigners, settled there by the Assyrians, and gradually lost their Israelite identity.

By contrast, Babylonians settled foreign deportees in compact groups to unpopulated, devastated by wars or undeveloped areas. Most Judean exiles lived together in communities.

The available sources depict the remarkable diversity

81 G. van Driel, *Elusive Silver*, 2002

82 There are theories that Cimmerians, who lived in Asia Minor in 8-7 century BCE, are remnants of the Ten tribes. Some authors even argue that they migrated as far as Scotland and England, and that English royal line comes from them. But this is mythology. Most probably the deported Ten tribes have been assimilated in Assyrian society.

within the deported Judeans. The majority worked as farmers; some lived in cities, enjoyed a good economic status and were well integrated into Babylonian society.



Al-Yahudu tablet, Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem

The earliest text of Al-Yahudu tablets dates to the thirty-third year of Nebuchadrezzar II. "Written by Babylonian scribes

on behalf of the Judean families that lived in and around Al-Yahudu, and following the style and legal forms that were current in Babylonia at the time, these tablets show that the exiles and their descendants had, at least to some extent, adopted the local language, script and legal traditions of Babylonia a relatively short time after their arrival there.”⁸³

The tablets cover the period from 572 to 477 BCE. They represent the gradual advancement in wealth and social position of several Judean families, particularly under the Achaemenids.

The texts prove that many Judean exiles quickly integrated into the foreign society, and already in the third generation in exile some of them were wealthy land-managers, royal merchants, officials, interpreters.

The Palace Archive of Nebuchadnezzar II reports of numerous foreign officials, craftsmen, artisans and soldiers in Babylon.

“Courtiers (*sha resh sharri*) from Egypt, Ashkelon, Judah and Elam worked in the palace, and numerous soldiers of foreign origin received rations from the royal storehouses. A small number of Egyptians guarded the boatyard (*bit sapinati*) and the administrative wing of the palace (*bit qiputi*), whereas

⁸³ Kathleen Abraham, *The reconstruction of Jewish communities in the Persian Empire: The Al-Yahudu clay tablets*, 2011

800 Elamites were employed as guards of the *bit qiputi*. More than 200 Carian guards worked in the city as well.”⁸⁴

The ration lists in the archive mention carpenters from Ionia, Arwad and Byblos. Egyptian ape-keepers and musicians from Ashkelon entertained the court.

“In addition to King Jehoiachin and his sons, a number of Judean people are referred to on the ration lists. Certain Qana-Yama delivered oil rations to Jehoiachin’s sons, which suggests that he was servant or overseer of the Judean Princes. Three other Judeans are mentioned by name. Samak-Yama and Shalam-Yama the gardener bear Hebrew names, and a certain Uru-Milki is explicitly described as Judean. Judean courtiers are attested among other royal officials of foreign origin, and a group of eight Judeans are referred to several times on the ration lists.”⁸⁵

The small group of former Judean elite, living in the palace - King Jehoiachin, his sons (or brothers) and few others - was nourished well enough. In addition to the sesame oil, they received barley and date beer as well.

Their relatively good life ended with the revolt of King Zedekiah. Jehoiachin was confined in prison. The Bible reads:

84 Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia : a study of deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*, p.58

85 *Ibid.*, p.59

“And it was in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin King of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, that Evil-merodach⁸⁶, King of Babylonia, in the year of his coronation, lifted up the head of Jehoiachin, King of Judah and released him from prison. And he spoke with him kindly and placed his throne above the throne of the Kings who were with him in Babylon. And he changed his prison garb, and he ate meals before him regularly all the days of his life. And his meals, regular meals were given him from the King, each day's need in its day, all the days of his life.”⁸⁷

There's a theory that Nebuchadrezzar's son and crown Prince Nabu-shuma-ukin fell victim to a court conspiracy and was sent to the prison, where he met Jehoiachin. When released in 566 BCE, he accepted the name Amel-Marduk. When his father Nebuchadrezzar died in 562, Amel-Marduk became King and released Jehoiachin from the prison. Another possibility is that release of Jehoiachin was traditional act of amnesty during the first Akitu festival of the new King Amel-Marduk.

Bustenay Oded argues that the word “prison” should not be taken in the narrow sense and Jehoiachin's life was not

⁸⁶ *Amel-Marduk*, son of Nebuchadrezzar II. Ruled 562-560 BCE

⁸⁷ II Kings 25/27-30

so hard as it may seem.

Judean merchants are an example of exiles who did relatively well in Babylonia. Several Al-Yahudu tablets pertain to the family of Arih, who were Judean royal merchants in the city of Sippar. The text reports that they traded with gold and silver, paid house rentals and made marriage agreements.

Another trading Judean family - Murashu - lived in the city of Nippur in Persia. They were entrepreneurs in the land-for-service sector. Promissory notes, receipts, leases, and other legal texts in Murashu archive reveal their dealings with the land-holders and the state administration. The tablets document their activities from 454 to 414 BCE.

The fact that Judeans preserved their nationality, returned to their land and rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple is not miraculous.

- Babylonian exile lasted for some fifty years, from 586 to 538 BCE

- the notion that all Judeans were exiled and then all returned, is completely wrong. Most people were left to live in their land. Exiles were only about 10-20% of the population. Those who returned to Judah were but a small part of all deportees. The majority of exiles remained in Babylonia and thrived; many migrated to better areas and big cities.

- Babylonian exile was not like the Egyptian slavery. The non-Mesopotamian deportees, including Judeans, were never treated as slaves or prisoners. Babylonians were not racists and allowed every skilled foreigner to take higher social positions. Hadassah-Esther, Mordecai and Nehemiah are but few examples.

There were several different groups among the exiles.

King Jehoiachin, his family, the high priesthood, royal entourage and few artisans, lived in the Babylonian palace and yearned for restoration of the Kingdom and the Temple. These people longed for their former elitist statute and ruling positions, and not surprisingly were the first who returned to Judah.

The biggest group, the former Judean middle class of lower officials and priests, business owners and their servants, worked in the land-for-service sector. They were busy to work and integrate into foreign society. They met new people, learned new languages and became full-fledged Babylonian and Persian citizens. Rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple was not their first priority, but when Judah was restored, they wholeheartedly supported their countrymen there.

The smallest group consisted of few scribes and low-rank Levites, who turned out to become the new teachers and sages of Israel. They were the only ones who cherished the

Torah, researched and explained the spiritual dimensions of destruction and found a way to rebirth of the Jewish nation⁸⁸.



88 See Part IV - "On Religion"

Part III

Back in Judah

While Neo-Babylonian empire was on the peak of its glory, new powers towered from the east. An ancient Iranian people who lived in Media⁸⁹, were Assyrian vassals for about 300 years, from tenth to the late seventh century BCE. Their leader Cyaxares (ruled c.625-585 BCE) united all Medians and allied with Nabopolassar of Babylon. Their alliance was sealed with the marriage of Amuita (Amytis), Cyaxares' daughter, to Nebuchadrezzar, son of Nabopolassar. Both rulers defeated the weakening Assyrian empire and destroyed Nineveh in 612 BCE. Cyaxares was succeeded by his son Astyages (ruled 585-550 BCE). According to Herodotus and Xenophon, Astyages married his daughter Mandane to Cambyses I, the King of Anshan⁹⁰, and Cyrus II the Great was son of Cambyses I and Mandane.

In 559 Cambyses I died, and Cyrus II (ruled 559-529 BCE) sat on the throne of Anshan. Six years thereafter he rebelled against his grandfather Astyages and conquered the Median empire.

89 The north-western parts of modern Iran

90 Ancient Elamite city in Zagros mountains, south-east of Mesopotamia. In seventh century BCE was taken by Teispes, leader of the Iranian tribe of Achaemenids. Teispes's son Cyrus I is grandfather of Cyrus II the Great, and his other son Ariaramnes is great grandfather of Darius I.



Cyrus the Great.
 "Illustrated World History"
 vol. I,
 Ernst Wallis, 1875

In 539 BCE Cyrus II defeated the last Chaldean ruler Nabonidus and became the first foreign King of Babylonia. Cyrus outsmarted Nabonidus. He dug large ditches around the city and rerouted Euphrates through them. Thus, the point where the river entered Babylon became dry, and Persians penetrated the city. The conquest of Babylon was peaceful. There were no mass killings and destruction. From the very beginning of his reign Cyrus was tolerant ruler.

In 1879 the British archaeologist and Assyriologist Hormuzd Rassam⁹¹ discovered in the ruins of Babylon clay cylinder with cuneiform script. The artifact was brought to the British Museum in London, where it was dated to 530s BCE, the time of Cyrus II. Several philologists translated the

⁹¹ Hormuzd Rassam (1826-1910) studied in the University of Oxford. He participated in many excavations in Mesopotamia - Nimrud (Khorsabad), Nineveh, Tel Balawat, Sippar, Babylon. Rassam found the famous relief of King Ashurbanipal, part of royal library with much of Epic of Gilgamesh texts, the palace of Shalmaneser II and its bronze gates, a tablet of King Nabu-apal-idin, and over 40,000 inscribed cylinders and tablets, including the Edict of Cyrus II. In 1897 Hormuzd Rassam wrote his book *Asshur And the Land of Nimrod*

preserved sections of the text with similar results. The last translation has been made by Dr. Irving Finkel⁹².

About four-fifths of the text consists of self-praises of Cyrus, "the King of the universe", how "Marduk, King of the gods", proclaimed him aloud for the Kingship over "all of everything" and sent him to free Babylon from Nabonidus. Part of Finkel's translation is of particular interest.

"From Shuanna (*Babylon*) I sent back to their places to the city of Ashur and Susa, Akkad, the land of Eshnunna, the city of Zamban, the city of Meturnu, Der, as far as the border of the land of Guti - the sanctuaries across the river Tigris - whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements, and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus - to the fury of the lord of the gods - had brought into Shuanna. At the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every day before Bel and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my

⁹² Dr Irving Finkel, b. 1951. Philologist, Assyriologist and Assistant keeper of the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum. He has been a cuneiform tablet curator there since 1979. His recent publications include *The Ark before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood* (2014)

lord, this: 'Cyrus, the King who fears you, and Cambyses his son, may they be the provisioners of our shrines until distant days', and the population of Babylon call blessings on my Kingship. I have enabled all the lands to live in peace."

The Book of Ezra 1/1-4 reads:

"And in the first year of Cyrus King of Persia, upon the conclusion of HaShem's prophecy by the mouth of Jeremiah, HaShem aroused the spirit of Cyrus King of Persia, and he issued a proclamation throughout his Kingdom - and in writing as well, saying: Thus said Cyrus King of Persia: All the Kingdoms of the earth has HaShem, God of heaven, given to me, and He has commanded me to build Him a Temple in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of His entire people - may his God be with him - and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and build the Temple of HaShem, God of Israel - He is the God! - which is in Jerusalem. And whoever remains, in whatever place he dwells, let the inhabitants of that place bestow upon him gifts of silver and gold⁷, of valuables and of animals; together with the contribution for the Temple of God which is in Jerusalem."

If the author of the Book of Ezra refers to the same Cyrus edict, which is in the British Museum, he had edited it to the benefit of his cause. Cyrus clearly states that his god Marduk, and not "Lord God of heaven", chose him to be King

and commanded him to bring back the gods of several Eastern peoples to their sanctuaries "across (to the east of) the river Tigris." Cyrus edict doesn't mention Judeans, Judah/Yehud, Jerusalem or the Temple.

Did Cyrus issue a particular edict for Judeans? The insignificant province of Yehud was not among his main concerns. According to Dr. John Hayes,⁹³ Cyrus ordered a group of exiles to return and build the Temple of their God in Jerusalem. This view is in accord with Ezra 6/3:

"In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus gave an order regarding the House of God in Jerusalem, that the House should be built, a place where they offer up sacrifices, and its walls should be founded, its height sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits."

The German historian and biblical scholar Martin Noth suggests a similar scenario. When the exiles knew about the edict, they requested the King for permission to rebuild their Temple. He allowed them, but neither they, nor the King ever had in mind return of all deportees⁹⁴.

93 Professor of Old Testament History at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. His book *History of Ancient Israel and Judah* was published in 2011

94 Martin Noth (1902-1968) specialized in the early history of the Jewish people, Professor of Theology at the University of Bonn from 1945 to 1965. In 1930, when he was 28, he published his first book *Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels* (The Scheme of the Twelve Tribes of Israel). In his monograph *History of Israel's Traditions*, published in 1943, he established a

One way or another, part of Judeans went back to their homeland. But most exiles never returned to Judah. Why?

The royal permission (or order) was only given to a small group, and not to all deportees. This group was from the former elite who wanted to regain their high social ranks and probably did their best to get the permission from Cyrus.

Judean exiles were granted hereditary right of use of the land. Some were bonded to their plots, but others integrated in Mesopotamian society and did well. These people already had constant income and source of sustenance. Even if they had the chance to return to Judah, it was unwise and risky to leave behind everything, to go with their families to an insecure and poor land, and begin their lives from zero.

In that time the region of Samaria was inhabited with mixed population. At the end of 8 century BCE the Assyrian Empire deported many Israelites and settled in their place Gentile tribes who worshiped pagan gods.

“Now each nation made its god, and they placed [it] in the temple of the high places that the people of Samaria had made, each nation in their cities wherein they were dwelling ... They feared HaShem, yet they worshiped their own gods, as

was the custom of the nations whom they had exiled from there."⁹⁵

The new settlers intermarried with the remnants of the Ten Israeli tribes. Their descendants' religion was syncretistic, they kept worshiping foreign gods, had mixed traditions, and were hostile to the Judeans and Benyaminites who remained in the Land after 586 BCE.

In addition, Samaritans, Moabites, Ammonites and Edomites constantly plundered the defenseless Judah.

These stressing facts were well known to the Judean deportees in Mesopotamia; some of them were traders who traveled all along Near East and told their countrymen what happened to Judah.

"After being liberated from the Babylonian yoke by Cyrus around 539 BCE, many Jewish families in Babylonia chose to remain there or to migrate to Persia, and thus to continue their lives in the Diaspora rather than join in the rebuilding of Jerusalem."⁹⁶

In 538 BCE, Zerubbabel/Sheshbazzar, "the Prince of Judah" (Ezra 1/8), was appointed as royal governor of Yehud, and led the first returnees back to their homeland⁹⁷.

95 II Kings 17/29,33

96 Kathleen Abraham, *The Reconstruction of Jewish Communities in the Persian Empire: The Al-Yahudu Clay Tablets*

97 In Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 41a, we find interesting Rabbinical opinion against the return from Babylonia: "As Rav Yehuda said, Anyone

There is no consensus whether Zerubbabel (*Zer-babili*, “Offspring of Babel”) and Sheshbazzar (*Shashu-ab-ushur*, “Shamash protects the father”) are two different people, or both are names of the same person. The latter view is plausible, because in that transitional era people often had two names - Chaldean and Persian. Another option is that *Zer-babili* was the nickname of *Shashu-ab-ushur*.

I Chronicles 3/17-19 states he was of the royal line:

“And the sons of Jeconiah [*Jehoiachin*, *A/N*]: Assir, Shealtiel his son, and Malciram, and Pedaiah, and Shenazzar, Jekamiah, Hoshama and Nedabiah. And the sons of Pedaiah: Zerubbabel and Shimi, and the son of Zerubbabel: Meshullam, and Hananiah, and Shelomith their sister.”

How many people went with Zerubbabel?

“The entire congregation together was forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty. Besides their slaves and their bondwomen; these were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven, and they had two hundred male and female singers.”⁹⁸.

These numbers are either deliberately exaggerated, or more possibly - result of incorrect translation. The Hebrew *elef*

who ascends from Babylonia to Eretz Israel, transgresses positive commandment, as it is stated: 'They shall be taken to Babylonia and there they shall remain until the day I recall them, said HaShem' (*Jeremiah* 27/22). Based on that verse, Rav Yehuda held that since the Babylonian exile was by divine decree, permission to leave Babylonia for Eretz Yisrael could only be granted by God."

98 Ezra 2/64-65

is traditionally translated to English as “thousand”, but this gives impossible numbers in the Bible.

For example, Exodus 12/37-38 reads:

“The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot, the men, besides the young children. And also, a great mixed multitude went up with them, and flocks and cattle, very much livestock.”

Numbers 1/45-47: “All the children of Israel were counted according to their fathers' houses, from twenty years and upward, all who were fit to go out to the army. The sum of all those who were counted: six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty. But the Levites, according to their father's tribe were not numbered among them.”

603,550 men means that all Israelites were more than two million people. Exodus 14/6-7 reads:

“So he [Pharaoh] harnessed his chariot, and took his people with him. He took six hundred select chariots and all the chariots of Egypt, with officers over them all”.

But wait a second. 600 chariots against 603,550 (even though not trained and poorly armed) men? It's pure fantasy.

In the autumn of 325 BCE Alexander the Great led his men from India to Mesopotamia through the Gedrosian desert. The Greek chronicler Arrian of Nicomedia wrote:

“The blazing heat and the lack of water caused innumerable casualties”⁹⁹.

In this sixty-days march through the desert, Alexander lost approximately 12,000 out of 30,000 trained soldiers who went with him.¹⁰⁰

Thinking of the Exodus, how many wagons of food and drinkable water would 2-3 million people need in the desert? Where did it come from, and who would supply it?

Later, when Israelites reached Canaan, Moses sent spies into the land. Ten of the twelve came back with a negative report, fearfully describing the strong Canaanite cities and warriors. Why? It would not be a problem at all for an army of six hundred thousand Israelites to literally cover Canaan and conquer it.

According to Rabbi Michael-Shelomo Bar-Ron, *elef* in its original meaning, when used for enumerating of people, refers to “chief”, “clan” or “family”.¹⁰¹

If *elef* in Ezra is understood as “family”, then 42,360 becomes “42 families [consisting of] 360 people.”

On the other hand, the translation of *elef* as family, chief, division, clan or group, is problematic, when the text

99 *Anabasis*, 6.24.4, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt

100 Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great*, 1988

101 Rabbi Michael-Shelomo Bar-Ron, *The Good Torah Sense of the ‘Alpha-Eleph’: How the Torah Counts the Tribes and Why*, 2017

refers to precious metals. In these cases *elef* should be understood as “thousand”.

Exodus 38/25-26 reads:

“The silver of the community numbers was one hundred talents and one thousand seven hundred and seventy five shekels, according to the holy shekel¹⁰². One beka per head; [that is,] half a shekel according to the holy shekel for each one who goes through the counting, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred three thousand, five hundred and fifty.”

Note that the counting of men follows the same pattern of numbering for *keseif* (silver) in the same passage. And “*elef vesheva meot vahamisha veshiv'im shekel*” clearly means 1775, and not “group and 775 shekels”, or something alike.

So, what does Hebrew *elef* mean? Obviously, this question needs more research.

But I digressed a little after this interesting issue. It's time to go back to Judah.

There the returnees started building the Temple.

“Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt-offerings thereon ... And when the builders laid the

102 The shekel of the sanctuary

foundation of the temple of HaShem, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise HaShem, according to the direction of David King of Israel."¹⁰³

Then Samaritans came in Jerusalem and asked to join the building. They were refused and left furious. Probably this was a smart set-up, a cunning move of theirs: Samaritans had their gods and shrines and never wanted sincerely to join the work. They only looked for *casus belli*, and found it. The expected refusal became legal reason for their hostility against the returnees. In the subsequent years, Samaritans did their best to stop the rebuilding of the Temple. They wrote complaint after complaint to the Persian Kings and managed to suspend the building for several years.

"They hired advisers against them to disrupt their plans, all the days of Koresh King of Persia, until the reign of Daryavesh King of Persia. During the reign of Achashverosh, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote a calumny against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. In the days of Artachshasta, wrote Bishlam, Mitredat, Tavel and the rest of his companions..."¹⁰⁴

103 Ezra 3/2,10

104 Ezra 4/5-7

According to Ezra 6/15, the Temple was finished in the sixth year of Darius I (522-486 BCE), i.e. in 516 BCE.

After the death of Cambyses II, Darius organized *coup d'état* against Cyrus' second son and legitimate heir Bardiya (Smerdis), killed him and usurped the throne. Later Darius did his best to falsify the history. He ordered the monumental Behistun (Bisotun) bas-relief.

The inscription reads that Darius killed the usurper, someone Gaumata the Magi, who allegedly pretended to be the royal heir Bardiya. Darius boasts that thus he restored the Achaemenid dynasty. But according to many historians, this is a fable and "Gaumata the Magi" was in fact the poor Bardiya.



Behistun relief.

Gaumata the Magi is the last in line with the high hat

Zerubbabel built the Temple, but Jerusalem remained unwalled and defenseless for many years, until the coming of Nehemiah. Diana Edelman, professor of Hebrew Bible and Old Testament Studies in University of Oslo, wrote:

“It [Jerusalem] remained an isolated kind of pilgrimage site for Jews from the local region as well as from the diaspora, until 444 when Artaxerxes I decided to establish Jerusalem as a fortified site that housed a Persian garrison”¹⁰⁵.

“For the city had wide open spaces and was large, but there were few people in it, and houses had not been built”¹⁰⁶.

According to the Bible, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BCE in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes I, 58 years after the completion of the Second Temple.

Why did he return? What happened to Judah?

The Book of Ezra uses the term *am-haaretz*.

Jeffrey Rubenstein¹⁰⁷ wrote, “Rabbinic sources use the term *am-haaretz*, literally ‘people of the land’, to refer to non-Rabbinic or uneducated Jews. This term derives from the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, where it designates the Israelites who had remained in Judea, when the aristocracy were deported to Babylonia during the first exile.”¹⁰⁸

105 Diana Edelman, *The Origins of the Second Temple*, 2005

106 Nehemiah 7/4

107 Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Literature in the New York University

108 J. L. Rubenstein, *The culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, 2003

Judah was in turmoil. Part of the former elite came back from exile and saw their lands taken by *am-haaretz*, the lower class. Quarrels of property arose, the social division grew.

The author of the Book of Ezra highlights the piety of the returnees, “the children of the captivity”:

“Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity were building a temple unto HaShem, the God of Israel...”¹⁰⁹

(The returnees, and not *am-haaretz*, build the Temple)

“And the children of the captivity kept the Passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month.”¹¹⁰

“The children of the captivity, that were come out of exile, offered burnt-offerings unto the God of Israel.”¹¹¹

Meaning - the returnees, and not *am-haaretz*, keep the Torah festivals and offer unto God.

“And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem; and that whosoever came not within three days, according to the counsel of the Princes and the elders, all his substance should

109 Ezra 4/1

110 Ibid. 6/19

111 Ibid. 8/35

be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of the captivity.”¹¹²

This text informs us that there was “congregation of the captivity” (*kahal ha-golah*, the elite caste), and common people (*am-haaretz*).

When Ezra came, he confirmed and strengthened the leadership of “congregation of the captivity” upon all Judean community. There was division among the priesthood, as well. Lester Grabbe¹¹³ wrote: “A distinction between altar priests and lower clergy (Levites, gatekeepers, etc.) was already in existence by this time, apparently.”¹¹⁴

This division later developed to the bitter hostility between Sadducees and Pharisees.

Ezra’s first task in Jerusalem was to stop the intermarriages of Jews¹¹⁵ with foreign women from Canaan, Egypt, Moab. Some local leaders came to Ezra and complained that intermarriages were very popular, and certain leaders were the first in this transgression.

Ezra didn’t examine their report. Why? Did he trust these men, or he knew about the problem before?

112 Ezra 10/7-8

113 Lester L. Grabbe, American scholar and Emeritus Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism at the University of Hull, England

114 Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, Vol. 1, p. 285–88

115 “Judeans” can be safely replaced with “Jews” after the return from Babylonian exile. Those who returned from Babylon were not only Judeans; people from the exiled Ten tribes joined them.

One verse implies he didn't know:

"I rent my garment and my robe, and I tore the hair of my head and my beard, and I sat bewildered."¹¹⁶

He prayed to God, then convened all Jews to Jerusalem, rebuked them, advised them to "cast out" their foreign wives, and ordered them to bring sin-offerings to the Temple.

Grabbe notes: "The wives in question seem more likely to be the descendants of Jews who were not deported rather than actual foreigners."¹¹⁷

This seems to be incorrect. Ezra 9 is clear:

"And when these were completed, the chiefs approached me, saying - The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites were not separated from the peoples of the lands¹¹⁸, like the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, and the holy seed has become mingled with the peoples of the lands, and the hand of the chiefs and the deputies was first in this treachery."

116 Ezra 9/4

117 L. L. Grabbe, *The Reality of the Return: The Biblical Picture Versus Historical Reconstruction*

118 "peoples of the lands", *amei haartzot* (plural), and not *am haaretz* (singular)

These women were not local Jewesses, *am-haaretz*; they were certainly non-Jewish. The phrase "foreign women" (*nashim nakariot*), except in Ezra 10/2, 10/10, 10/14, 10/17-18, 10/44 and Nehemiah 13/27, appears also in I Kings 11/1:

"King Solomon loved many foreign women and the daughter of Pharaoh; Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites."

Here too, *nashim nakariot* means Gentile women.

About 444 BCE, Persian King Artaxerxes I (ruled 465-424) appointed his chief butler Nehemiah Ben Hacaliah as governor of Judah and sent him with orders to Jerusalem, escorted by military unit of "officers of the army and horsemen"¹¹⁹.

King Artaxerxes I was son of Xerxes I.

Some authors argue that Xerxes I was the Biblical Ahashverosh (Ahasuerus). Is it possible?

In 19 century Sir Henry Rawlinson¹²⁰ deciphered the names of Persian Kings, inscribed in Old Persian cuneiform on the Behistun bas-relief. The original Persian form of Xerxes' name was Khshayarsha, which is very close to the Biblical Achashverosh. Both consist of the consonants CH-SH-R-SH.

119 Nehemiah 2/9

120 Sir Henry Rawlinson (1810-1895), British army officer and Orientalist.

In Hebrew, when foreign name begins with two consonants, it receives an initial alef. Y and V in Hebrew are written with the letter Vav, and CH-SH-R-SH became A-CH-SH-V-R-SH.

The Greek language has no SH sound and SH becomes KS / X. The name Khshayarsha must have been a challenge to the ancient Greeks, and they adopted the simple X-R-X, with the usual Greek suffix "-es." Thus Persian Khshayarsha became the Greek Xerxes.

The Greek historian Herodotus (5 century BCE) reports the name of Xerxes' wife: Amestris. This name resembles the Hebrew "Esther". There is good possibility that Xerxes and Amestris were indeed Achashverosh and Esther.

If they were, their son Artaxerxes would be half-Jewish. Is it coincidence that both Nehemiah and Ezra returned to Judah during his reign?

Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah to Judah, and the Bible states he fulfilled King's orders: he hired workers and built the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple. He also built the gates of the fortress that belongs to (is close to) the Temple.

Some scholars claim Nehemiah didn't build anything. Prof. Israel Finkelstein, the famous Israeli archaeologist, argues that there is no archaeological evidence for the city wall built by Nehemiah. His reasoning is:

“And why should the Persian authorities allow the reconstruction of the old, ruined fortifications and make the only fortified town in the hill country? The explanations of scholars who have dealt with this issue, that this was made possible because of the revolt in Egypt and so on ... seem far-fetched, given the location of Jerusalem, distant from Egypt, international roads, coastal ports or other strategic locations”¹²¹.

The available sources though support the biblical narrative. Tanakh depicts Nehemiah Ben Hacaliah as honest and humble man with love to his people and the Land. He governed Judah for twelve years,¹²² a time full of hardships, fights and bitter disappointments.

Nehemiah had many enemies: “the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets” (Neh. 6/14), Shemaiah the son of Delaiah (Neh. 6/10), “Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites.” (Neh. 4/1)

Sanballat the Horonite (*from Bet Horon, A/N*) was Persian governor of Samaria. His name is Assyrian,¹²³ but he was Israelite or Judean: his sons’ names, mentioned in the Elephantine letters, are Delaiah and Shelemiah. His daughter

121 Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Vol 32.4, 2008

122 Neh. 2, Neh. 13

123 *Sin-uballit* - “[god] Sin gives life”

married the son of Eliashib, the Judean High Priest.¹²⁴

Tobiah the Ammonite slave, was Jewish as well¹²⁵. He was influential high-rank official and not a slave. In his book Nehemiah used the word *eved* (slave, servant) in order to express his contempt: Tobiah was a foreign puppet, a traitor who worked with his Ammonite masters against his own people.

Sanballat wrote to Nehemiah: “you and the Jews think to rebel; for which cause you build the wall; and you would be their King”¹²⁶. Did Sanballat say this out of malice, envy and personal hatred to Nehemiah - the royal butler who became governor?

In the fifth century BCE, the Persian empire waged wars with Greece and strengthened its influence in Levant and Asia Minor. Egyptians were under Persian rule, but in the 480s and 460s they rebelled; Xerxes I and his son Artaxerxes I were forced to intervene and suppress the riots. Persians were apprehensive to any possibility of insurgence in the region. Fully aware of that, Sanballat overplayed loyalty, aiming to please his suspicious Persian masters and secure his own position. It seems his tactic was successful: his descendants

124 Neh. 13/28

125 Neh. 2/19, *Toviah haeved amoni*, translated also as “Tobiah the servant, Ammonite”. His name and his kinship with Eliashib the High Priest, imply that he was a Jew.

126 Neh. 6/6

were governors of Samaria for more than a century, up until Alexander the Great.

Eliashib, who supported Nehemiah in rebuilding the wall,¹²⁷ married his grandson to Sanballat's daughter. Moreover, he granted Tobiah a warehouse in the Temple:

“Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being allied unto Tobiah, had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meal-offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the wine, and the oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the heave-offerings for the priests... And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them; so that the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field.”¹²⁸

Eliashib was hardly the first. He just followed the common practice. Ever since the restoration of the Temple, the high priesthood considered it their property. The edifice was profaned and turned to private business center.

Intermarriages with foreigners, despite the oaths and the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah, never ceased.

127 “Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they built the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up its doors”, Neh. 3/1

128 Neh. 13/4-5, 10

When Ezra came, “And on the second day, the heads of the fathers’ houses of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, gathered to Ezra the scholar, and to understand the words of the Torah. And they found written in the Torah that HaShem had commanded by the hand of Moses that the Children of Israel dwell in booths on the festival in the seventh month.”¹²⁹

They *discovered* the Torah commandment, because they *didn’t know it*. The question is, what Law did priests teach the people before Ezra? What other commands they didn’t know? What rituals did they perform? It seems that priesthood was anything else but spiritual leaders.

In the fifth century in Judah, there was bitter enmity between the Babylonian returnees and the locals (*am-haaretz* and influential Jews like Sanballat and Tobiah), but still it was not extreme. The bad feelings smoldered in the next 300 years, when they led to social disintegration, open hatred and civil wars, which long before 70 CE predestined the end of the Second Jewish Commonwealth.



129 Neh. 8/13-14

Part IV
On Religion

*“He has told you, O man, what is good,
and what the Lord demands of you;
but to do justice, to love loving-kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God”*

Micah 6/8

The destruction of the First Temple and the Kingdom were predicted. In the days of old, when Solomon Temple still stood, prophets warned and rebuked Kings, priests, officials and people of Judah, urged them to quit “the ways of iniquity” and turn to God. But most people didn’t listen and didn’t observe even the most basic Torah commandments like Shabbat.

“So said HaShem: Beware for your souls and carry no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it into the gates of Jerusalem. Neither shall you take a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day nor shall you perform any labor, and you shall hallow the Sabbath day as I commanded your forefathers. But they did not hear, neither did they bend their ear, and they stiffened their neck, in order not to hear and in order not to accept rebuke”.¹³⁰

130 Jeremiah 17/21-23

In 586 the Babylonians destroyed the Kingdom, and the Temple - the material symbol of God's presence on Earth - was burned and leveled with the ground. Many Judeans were exiled to a foreign land. There they wept by the rivers of Babylon, mourned and remembered Zion, but didn't repent for the mass idolatry, shedding of innocent blood, fratricide, religious hypocrisy, immorality and corruption - the real reasons for the destruction and exile. They still didn't realize what happened.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple required explanation. Didn't God promise the Land to Abraham and his descendants? Didn't He choose Zion and Jerusalem for place of His dwelling? Didn't God promise to protect Israel forever?

The sad reality in August 586 was speaking differently. As if the history of Chosen people was over.

In Babylon, a small group of Judean exiles began to understand what prophets had talked about. The awareness of what they were granted and what they have lost, brought strong feelings of shame and guilt. It was painful, but there was no time for despair. A new way had to be found quickly.

Most exiles may felt guilt, but only few of them were wise and brave enough to undertake the hard task of spiritual restoration. They didn't emerge from the priests, Princes, royal officials. These few, who became the new spiritual leaders and

teachers (*Rabbis*) of Judean/Jewish people, were scribes¹³¹ and low-rank Levites. They developed a new, revolutionary world-view which secured the preservation of Jewish nationality and tradition for many centuries ahead. In the foundation of this new doctrine was the friendly, open and tolerant attitude to the foreigners. The old chauvinism was rejected. The deportees still remembered the haughty Zedekiah, his blind nationalism and the tragic consequences for Judah.

Now the *soferim-Rabbis* went a new way, characterized by active and flexible adaptation in foreign society, learning new languages and open communication with foreigners. This attitude became a national feature of Judeans, and later - of Jewish people.

But it was not only about the physical survival. Many others survived as individuals, yet disappeared as peoples. Phoenicians, for example, were flexible, smart, innovative; talented artisans, brave sailors and warriors. They roamed the ancient world and founded many colonies in foreign lands, but nevertheless lost their nationality.

The unique achievement of Judean sages was spiritual. First, they rejected the idolatry, which was so popular and widely practiced in Judah in the First Temple period. They

131 *Soferim* in Hebrew

realized that unfaithfulness to God brought the destruction and exile. It became perfectly clear that God's promises of Land and protection are not unconditional: He will be with them as far as they are with Him.

But how to keep the Law without Temple? Many observances included Temple activities, offerings, rituals and priests.

Judean sages introduced the Oral Law. Initially, it comprised traditional oral rulings and legal interpretations which were not included in Written Law.

Oral Law was more flexible and adapted to the new reality than the Written Torah. Animal sacrifices (*korbanot*) were replaced by prayer. This wasn't new idea. Already in the time of the First Temple prophet Isaiah spoke the word of God:

“Of what use are your many sacrifices to Me? says HaShem. I am sated with the burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle; and the blood of bulls and sheep and he-goats I do not want ... Wash, cleanse yourselves, remove the evil of your deeds from before My eyes, cease to do evil. Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the case of the widow.”¹³²

Temple sacrifices were external expression of one's gratitude or repentance. Isaiah explicitly declared that ritual by

132 Isaiah 1/11,16-17

itself, without proper attitude, is useless and even abominable to God. Only genuine repentance and just deeds, and not animal blood, enable God to forgive.

When Jonah showed the people of Nineveh their sins, they sincerely repented, fasted and prayed, and were spared. The Book of Esther reports how Persian Jews did the same and were miraculously saved from destruction.

Thus sincere prayer rightfully replaced the sacrifices.

The Rabbis claimed that God taught the Oral Law to Moses along with the Written Law. Their claim was based on the biblical phrase “as I commanded you”.

We see this phrase four times in Exodus, and once in Deuteronomy.

1) Ex. 23/15 ‘The feast of unleavened bread shall you keep; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Aviv, for in it you came out from Egypt; and none shall appear before Me empty”

This clearly refers to the commandment in Ex.12-13.

2) Ex. 31/6-7 “And I, behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and in the hearts of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the Tent of Meeting and the ark for the testimony...”

3) Ex. 31/11 "... and the anointing oil, and the incense of sweet spices for the holy place; according to all that I have commanded you shall they do"

This refers to the commandment in Ex.30

4) Ex. 34/18 "The feast of unleavened bread shall you keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Aviv, for in the month Aviv you came out from Egypt"

Reference to Ex.12-13 again.

5) Deut. 12/21 "If the place which HaShem your God shall choose to put His name there be too far from you, then you shall slaughter of your herd and of your flock, which HaShem has given you, as I have commanded you, and you shall eat within your gates, after all the desire of your soul"

Babylonian Talmud explains: "Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says, The Torah states 'And you shall slaughter of your herd and of your flock, which HaShem has given you, as I have commanded you'. This verse teaches that Moses was previously commanded about the halakhot (laws) of slaughter, even though they are not written explicitly in the Torah."¹³³

The commandment of killing animals "of your herd and of your flock" along with the proper way to do it, was given to Moses earlier, but for some reason it remained unwritten. And

133 Chullin 28a

there are other commandments in the Written Torah with no explanation how to observe them. For example, “Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it”.¹³⁴

What does it mean “remember”, and how to “sanctify”? A proper guidance was necessary.

Jewish scholars developed the ancient rulings, added their interpretations to them and called this set of unwritten commandments “Oral Law”. Later these rulings were known as Mishnah, and Rabbinical commentaries and debates on various issues of the Mishnah were called Gemarah. Over time Mishnah and Gemarah grew up to a vast textual corpus which was written down after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

The Anglican scholar Rev. Herbert Danby wrote:

“A multitude of usages arising out of practical necessity or convenience or experience became part of the routine of observance of the code, and, in the course of time, shared the sanctity and authority which were inherent in the divinely inspired code itself.”¹³⁵

This is very important point. Jewish sages in Babylon were not inventors of new laws and traditions, as many biblical minimalists argue. Some oral tradition already existed in the

¹³⁴ Exodus 20/8

¹³⁵ Danby, Herbert, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes*, 2012

period from Moses to the Babylonian exile. It was modest and consisted of necessary guidance and technical details of the proper Torah observance.

What Judean scholars created in exile, was not religious dogma.¹³⁶ They developed the Law.

This may seem patent heresy: isn't God's Law absolute, perfect and immutable?

And what is "God's Law" - the words of Torah, or the ideas behind them? The adherence to the words would bring outdated fanaticism, which takes out eyes, kills "rebellious son", kill people with stones and punishes *mamzer* for ten generations.¹³⁷

Is this the justice God wants? Hardly.

Then how is the Torah divine?

Here we come to the idea of Torah layers. Some scholars talk of "divine Torah" and "human Torah", but this is too rough. Torah can be likened to a stairway with many steps. The commandments, connected with the place and time they

¹³⁶ As is the case with Buddhism, Christianity, Islam: the ancient, basic dogmas of these religions still are considered sacred and indisputable. In contrast, Judaism is open to any questions. Talmud states: "Even if Joshua bin-Nun said it, I would not hear it" (Chullin 124a). This means that one must think by himself and not blindly believe authorities and sages, no matter how wise they may have been. Therefore Judaism can be considered a religion of reason, and not of blind faith.

¹³⁷ *Mamzer*, a child of adulterous or incestuous union. "A bastard shall not enter the assembly of the Lord; even the tenth generation shall not enter the assembly of the Lord" (Deut. 23/3)

were given, are the lower steps. For example, animal sacrifices. Every people in the time of Moses sacrificed to their gods; it was common legal practice. It would be impossible for the ancient Israelites to overjump their era and worship God without animal offerings.

Similar “lower steps” were the stoning of idolaters and polytheists, the severe punishments for breaking the Sabbath, the seeming acceptance of slavery, etc.

Rabbi Cardozo wrote:

“While the Divine Will may want to accomplish the ultimate, it is constrained by the limitations of human ability. The Torah, then, is really a divine compromise, filtered through the mindset and mores of its intended audience. It is therefore flawed in the sense that it must sometimes allow or introduce laws that are far from ideal but were the best possible option at the time they were revealed to the Jewish people, or like in other cases were never meant to be applied literally”¹³⁸.

Higher steps of Torah like “You shall not steal”, “You shall not murder”, “You shall not accept a bribe”, “You shall not mistreat a stranger”, require personal development. They are much more comprehensible for us, and not accidentally lay in

¹³⁸Rabbi Dr.Nathan Lopes Cardozo, *TheDeliberately Flawed Divine Torah (The Theology of the Halachic Loophole)*

the foundations of many current legal codes. They open the door to the universal dimension of Jewish Torah.

As regards “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”, or “You shall have no other gods before Me” and others alike, they are (and in fact had always been) stumbling block for the vast majority of mankind. They presuppose knowledge of the human nature and God’s Oneness, which only comes after years of research, study and gradual spiritual evolution. These layer of commandments are Torah’s highest stage, serving as eternal moral beacon on the road to God.

As Rabbi Cardozo puts it: “... the text [of Torah] created a vision and aspiration in stages. It gave human beings a feeling of how things should really be, while not yet asking them to go all the way. It reveals an understanding, as Maimonides teaches¹³⁹, that such changes need time to reach human beings, since a person cannot make a sudden transition from one opposite to another ... So the text of the Torah is human in the sense that it is the human condition that will determine what will appear in the divine text and what will not.”¹⁴⁰

The Rabbis knew that Torah is divine, but also realized that it is not final, dogmatic, frozen text, which cannot and must

139 *Guide For the Perplexed*, 3/27

140 Rabbi Cardozo, *The Deliberately Flawed Divine Torah*

not be updated. They understood that ideas matter, not words.

By the rivers of Babylon started the long process of rationalization and development of ancient teachings and traditions. The genuine ideas of Torah were preserved and implemented in every aspect of Jewish life.

In Babylonia, the handful of revolutionaries were opposed and mocked by the remnants of former Judean elite. The latter wanted restoration of the old *status quo*, and not surprisingly, the first who returned with Zerubbabel were the priestly families and their servants.

Authenticity of Torah has been questioned many times. Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) stated that the word of God is faulty, mutilated, tampered and inconsistent; we possess it only in fragments and the original of the covenant which God made with the Jews has been lost¹⁴¹. According to Spinoza, it was only many centuries after Moses died that the Torah, as we know it today, appeared. He insisted that the Torah should be seen as the product of human spiritual development, mostly of a primitive nature.

At the end of 19 century, Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), a German Semitic scholar and professor of theology and oriental studies, denied the divinity of Torah.

141 B. de Spinoza, *A Theologic-Political Treatise*, 1951, p.165

“Wellhausen wanted to prove that the Torah and the Book of Joshua were, in large measure, ‘doctored’ by priestly canonizers under Ezra in the lime of the Second Temple. Their purpose was to perpetuate a single falsehood: Moshe's authorship of the Torah and the central worship, first in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. According to Wellhausen, there never was a Tabernacle and no revelation at Sinai ever took place. Moshe, if he ever existed, considered the Deity a local thunder god or mountain god. The Torah had, therefore, to be seen as a complete forgery and not as a verbal account of God's words to Moshe and the People Israel”.¹⁴²

In 1875 Wellhausen published his “Documentary Hypothesis”, according to which the text of Pentateuch is combination from four different documents (sources). This hypothesis became very popular and in the 20 century won many supporters. They enthusiastically “discovered” so many new forgeries in the Torah and the Bible, that “the whole theory degenerated into a *reductio ad absurdum*.”

Despite common sense and logic, still many claim that this hypothesis is the ultimate scientific view of Pentateuch. Why is this continuous, unrelenting stubbornness?

The American biochemist and Nobel prize winner George Wald (1906-1997) honestly confesses:

142 R. Nathan L. Cardozo, *On Bible Criticism and Its Counterarguments*

“There are only two possibilities as to how life arose. One is spontaneous generation arising to evolution; the other is a supernatural creative act of God. There is no third possibility. Spontaneous generation, that life arose from non-living matter was scientifically disproved 120 years ago by Louis Pasteur and others. That leaves us with the only possible conclusion that life arose as a supernatural creative act of God. I will not accept that philosophically because I do not want to believe in God. Therefore, I choose to believe in that which I know is scientifically impossible: spontaneous generation arising to evolution.”¹⁴³

Here is the key: “I *do not want* to believe in God and therefore *choose* the impossible.”

This is the “holy of holies” of atheism, its foundation. “There is no God” is unprovable neither scientifically, nor logically: it’s a matter of belief. Religion is based on faith, so atheism is religion by itself.

Honesty requires admitting that the other statement - “there is God” - is unprovable, too.

Both claims are equal philosophical opposites. They are in the realm of faith, beyond the scope of logic.

143 George Wald, “Innovation and Biology”, *Scientific American*, Vol. 199, Sept. 1958

But human reason can reach the conclusion that “it is impossible that there is no God.” It may seem identical with “there is God”, and it’s not. The seemingly insignificant difference is in fact substantial: it separates intelligence from faith. The negative “it’s impossible that God doesn’t exist” is ultimate achievement of human logic, its highest limit. In contrast to the two positive statements, it doesn’t require blind (or any) belief, and therefore is not religious.

The above quote of G. Wald demonstrates the religious state of mind of many (if not all) atheists, including the brave defenders of Documentary hypothesis. There are reasonable arguments that some texts in the Torah were added later. Here, though, I have in mind the highest layers of Torah.

Let’s assume that all Torah was invented during and after Babylonian exile.

Then how did the would-be inventors convince their countrymen that their common ancestors witnessed some Sinai revelation, given it never happened? If no father, no grandfather, nobody ever mentioned it before, who would believe it now, in Babylon?

Why had been invented uncanny commandments like “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”¹⁴⁴, “When you

144 Lev. 19/18

besiege a city ... to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees"¹⁴⁵, or "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"¹⁴⁶?

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" in an era of bloody wars? "You shall not steal" in a world of merciless robbers like Assyrians, Ammonites, Edomites, Egyptians, Philistines?

In my opinion, invention of Torah (or its highest layers at least) is beyond human abilities. A famous Midrash (commentary) states: "If a person tells you there is wisdom among the nations of the world, believe him. If a person tells you there is Torah among the nations of the world, do not believe him."¹⁴⁷

God opened the gates of wisdom before the nations, but revealed His Law only in Torah. Many religions and philosophies like Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Krishnaism, Mesoamerican Nagualism, and especially Buddhism, offer interesting ideas and wise notes of life and morality.

None of them, though, can compare Torah's simple and clear ideas:

- Respect to Creator
- Respect to other people, to their life, family, property, good name

¹⁴⁵ Deut 20/19

¹⁴⁶ Ex. 20/8

¹⁴⁷ Eichah Rabbah 2/13

- Respect to life and Creation in general (no cruelty to animals; Sabbatical and Jubilee years)

Of course, this is my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree.

Many peoples in history wrote legal codes. All of them represent the level of development, philosophy, interests and culture of specific ethos.

For example, the famous Hammurabi code¹⁴⁸ states:

“If any one steal cattle or sheep, or an ass, or a pig or a goat, if it belongs to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirty-fold therefore; if they belonged to a freed man of the King he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death”¹⁴⁹.

Hammurabi justly forbids larceny, but decrees severely disproportionate punishment.

In contrast, Torah proclaims retaliation authorized by law, in which the punishment corresponds in kind and degree to the injury, no matter the social status of perpetrator.

This is the meaning of the famous principle “eye for an eye”.¹⁵⁰ The thief must pay double what he stole (Exodus 22/3). In certain cases of stealing livestock, he might have to

148 19 - 18 century BCE

149 Translated by L. W. King. The Avalon Project

150 Ex 21/24. This just principle, which is the base of modern criminal law, is often misinterpreted and given as example of “the cruel Mosaic law”. The paradox is that this very principle forbids cruelty.

pay back four or five times what he stole (Exodus 21/37). If a thief cannot pay back, he had to work off his debt (Exodus 22/2), and not put to death.

For many centuries Jewish sages have been researching and discussing the Torah. Talmudic Rabbis, Rashi (1040-1105), Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), Maimonides (1135-1204), Nachmanides (1194-1270), Samson R. Hirsch (1808-1888) and many others wrote books, *responsa*, commentaries, and commentaries to commentaries of the Law.

The Tanakh is Jewish book originally written in Hebrew language. But in addition to its particular meaning to Jewish people, it has universal dimension which refers to all mankind.

Babylonian Talmud reads:

“Our Rabbis taught, The descendants of Noah, i.e., all of humanity, were commanded to observe seven mitzvot¹⁵¹: [establishing] courts of judgments; [the prohibition against] blessing, (i.e., cursing) the name of God; idol worship; forbidden sexual relations; bloodshed; robbery; and eating a limb [torn] from a living animal.”¹⁵²

Other Rabbis add more prohibitions to the first seven: consuming of blood, castration, sorcery, wearing wool and

151 Commandments.

152 Sanhedrin 56a

linen together, sowing diverse kinds of seeds together, grafting diverse species of plants.

People's views of the Seven laws vary from one extreme to another, from harsh rejection to total approval. The deniers call the Seven laws evil Jewish propaganda. The opposite camp argues that they were revealed to Moses in Sinai along with Torah, and are therefore holy and mandatory.

History and logic disprove both views. The text quoted above is not proclamation of the Seven laws to non-Jews. Rabbis discuss the issue of blasphemy and only mention the Seven laws in passing. Moreover, these laws are considered as long known ("our Rabbis taught.."). No Talmudic Rabbi turns to non-Jews trying to preach them something. It's clear that Seven laws, as given in Sanhedrin 56, were not direct God's revelation to mankind; even less were they given to Moses in Sinai. Tanakh itself refutes this idea. Long before Sinai God told to Cain: "... at the entrance sin is lying, and to you is its longing, but you can rule over it."¹⁵³

Who taught Cain what is "sin"? Yet he knew what God was talking about.

"Noah was a righteous man; he was perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God."¹⁵⁴

153 Gen. 4/7

154 Gen. 6/9. The Hebrew *tamim* means "perfect" and "simple-hearted".

What does it mean “righteous” and “perfect”? By what criteria?

These are but two examples which imply that mankind can recognize right from wrong from the very beginning.

The Seven laws of Noah are educated opinion of the Rabbis: the people who knew and observed God’s law, the Torah. Nothing more, nothing less. Everyone is free to choose to respect the Seven laws, or not.

It’s a matter of personal choice. As always has been.



Timeline

732	Anti-Assyrian alliance of Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel. Tiglath-pileser III destroys them and installs Hoshea as King of Israel. Israel is reduced and cut from the sea. Part of royal elite is deported. Aram becomes Assyrian province.
723	Hoshea of Israel stops paying tribute to Shalmaneser V and asks Pharaoh for military support.
722	Assyrians invade Israel, imprison Hoshea and take the city of Samaria. Substantial part of population deported to Assyria. Foreign tribes settled to Samaria. Israel becomes Assyrian province.
720	Sargon II quells the riot in Israel and deports 27,290 people. More foreigners settled to Samaria.
701	Sennacherib invades Judah. Lachish is taken and destroyed. Siege of Jerusalem. Hezekiah becomes Assyrian vassal and pays heavy tribute.
609	Battle of Megiddo. King Josiah dies. Pharaoh Necho II installs Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah.
604-603	Nebuchadrezzar II raids Philistia. Jehoiakim becomes his vassal. Daniel sent hostage to Babylon.
600-599	Jehoiakim breaks the treaty with Babylon and allies with Egypt.
597	Jehoiakim dies and his son Jehoiachin becomes King. Nebuchadrezzar II takes Jerusalem. King Jehoiachin and part of the elite deported to Babylon. Zedekiah becomes King of Judah.
589	Hophra becomes Pharaoh and offers alliance to Zedekiah. Zedekiah breaks with Babylon and allies with Egypt.
587	Nebuchadrezzar II besieges Jerusalem. Gedaliah appointed as governor of the province.
Aug 586	Babylonians take Jerusalem. Zedekiah is captured, blinded and sent to Babylon.
Sept 586	Destruction of the First Temple and Jerusalem. Majority of the royal elite and priests exiled to Babylon.
582	Gedaliah assassinated. Prophet Jeremiah taken to Egypt.

	Deportation of 745 Judeans to Babylon.
539	Cyrus edict
538	360 Judeans led by Zerubbabel return to Jerusalem.
516	Second Temple is finished.
468 - 465	Xerxes I. Esther and Mordecai (?)
458	Ezra returns to Jerusalem.
444	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem.
432	Nehemiah goes to Susa and then returns to Judah.