

After Exile – The Book of Kings, Part 4

After Exile

Following Jezebel's death, the dynasty's stability ends. The entire Deuteronomistic History builds up to 2 Kings 17, which culminates in Israel's exile. Exile is portrayed as comeuppance for the people and their leaders' bad behavior. If the northern kingdom had heeded the prophets' warnings and changed their ways, the text suggests things might have turned out differently.

Although the Israelites are forcibly removed and taken to Assyria, the land is not left entirely empty. Some northern Israelites remain and Assyrians are brought in. This is the Assyrians' imperial policy: forced removal (exile) and forced implantation of non-natives to govern, administer, and settle the land. According to the Deuteronomistic retelling of history, there were no true Yahwists left in the north after the exile. Archeological evidence, however, indicates otherwise. There was a community of dedicated YHWH worshippers on Mount Gerizim with their own version of the Torah. Some still reside there today.

One underlying question is whether you have to have experienced exile in order to be a true Israelite. There were no official rules that define what it means to be an Israelite. Belonging later becomes attached to practices like circumcision, Passover, and other cultural and religious customs. The narrative that all Israelites are descendants of Jacob makes it difficult to incorporate new groups and settlers into the community. Although conversion became possible later, it was not yet an option at this point in time. Yet some "outsiders" have been absorbed into the community at every point in history, which continues to shift the makeup of the population.

King Hezekiah

It was not till after exile that the southern kingdom started paying close attention to the law of Moses. The Deuteronomistic historian regards Hezekiah as one of Israel's greatest kings (2Kgs 18; 2Chr 29). The time of Hezekiah also seems to have been a time of literary flourishing. The Bible credits him with collecting proverbs and many prophetic books tie back to his reign. Hezekiah is also credited with some religious reforms, including centralizing worship in the cult in Jerusalem.

Scholarly arguments continue over whether Hezekiah or Josiah ought to receive credit for the move toward centralized worship. It is possible that Hezekiah sought to consolidate smaller countryside sanctuaries in Jerusalem because they were economic hubs. Some scholars argue, however, that the Assyrians ultimately deserve credit for centralizing worship in Jerusalem because most of these smaller shrines were probably destroyed during their invasion.

Sennacherib was a great Assyrian king who led his army West, besieged Jerusalem, and destroyed the surrounding area. Although Jerusalem's temple was destroyed, the city itself was not completely leveled. The idea that everything in Judah was destroyed *except* Jerusalem eventually becomes the foundation of long-standing Zionist theologies. Sennacherib's army was strong enough to take the city. So why didn't he? The answer depends on which version of the story you read.

Biblical accounts say that Hezekiah prayed, and an "angel of the Lord" came down and slew 185,000 troops in the Assyrian army's camp (2Kgs 19:20-37; Isa 37:21-38). The Assyrians' version says that Hezekiah humbled himself, scraped gold off of the temple walls, and gave it to the Assyrians along with all his daughters. Once again, the truth probably lies somewhere between these two versions of the story. It was typical for kings to pledge fealty to invaders by paying tribute and Assyria had been powerful long before Sennacherib's rule. It could be that Hezekiah's initial rebellion was an attempt to avoid paying tribute to the Assyrian empire in the first place.

King Josiah

King Josiah came to the throne at a very young age. According to 2 Kings 23, the book of the law of the Lord was discovered during Josiah's reign. It is unlikely that this discovery was the full Torah but may instead have included core texts from the book of Deuteronomy. According to Kings, Josiah does everything that Deuteronomy demands (centralizing worship, getting rid of foreign gods, etc.). Although we cannot know whether Josiah actually found the book of Deuteronomy, it is clear that there is a link between the two texts.

Deuteronomy seems to be a northern book. Because there are no specific references to Jerusalem in Deuteronomy, readers fill in the gaps based on phrases like "the place that the Lord has chosen." Yet the book only mentions northern locations like Shechem and Mount Ebal. It could be that some northern refugees brought this text with them after exile.

Rather than Deuteronomy influencing Josiah, Josiah may have influenced Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy is essentially a literary expression of King Josiah's reforms. Yet much of Deuteronomy's content is not directly related to Josiah's program. Most likely, Josiah's administration adapted some material from older traditions and used it to lend credibility to the whole enterprise.

The Bible lifts up Josiah as the greatest king since David. For this reason, the kingdom's fall and Josiah's death come as a surprise. The text grasps at an explanation for this surprising twist, claiming that God mercifully took Josiah so that he would not have to witness Jerusalem's suffering.