Who is who in Babylonia? : Identity and belonging in the prayer for the Babylonian city (Jer 29:7)

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Who is who in Babylonia?
Identity and Belonging in the Prayer for the Babylonian City (Jer 29:7)

> As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? (Jer 7:16-17)
>
> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:7)[1]

The contrast between these two verses in the book of Jeremiah is radical. Prayers for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and other Judean cities are rejected whereas the prayer for Babylonian cities is commanded. At least in the current literary version of the book, it seems that God tries to abandon all ties to the holy city and calls on the people of God to follow suit. Apparently, the focus of the Judeans should move from Jerusalem to the diaspora.

Of course, the juxtaposition of these two verses is too limited to be representative of the entire book. After all, Jeremiah continues to act in Judah after the Babylonian conquest, and God even commands the Judeans to stay in Judah instead of fleeing to Egypt (Jer 42-43). Nevertheless, the tension between the two verses reflects questions that are frequently raised when persons experience migration. What importance do networks to the place of origin still have after the migration? How do they correspond with the networks in the new place of residence? How can affiliations to two different communities be combined?

The command to pray for the Babylonian city is part of the so-called Letter to the Exiles in Jer 29:1-7. It is the only text in the book of Jeremiah that refers to life in Babylonia *after* the deportation. Therefore, it can be read as a text on migration which negotiates typical issues of migration communities such as

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[1] I thank both the reviewer and Sonja Ammann for their insightful comments which enriched this article.
All translations of Hebrew biblical texts follow the New Revised Standard Version of 1989 with one modification: The NRSV translates the divine name as «Lord». For my argument, it is crucial that the deportees pray to the God YHWH and not to any other deities that might be «lords» over their lives. Therefore, I indicate the divine name in biblical quotations by the transcription YHWH.

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self-understanding and social location.[2] These debates are often associated with concepts of identity. However, the term «identity» has been increasingly criticized in recent years. Alternative models have been proposed, one of them being the concept of belonging. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the shift from identity to belonging enhances our reading of the Letter to the Exiles. First, I will evaluate the text in its literary and historical setting. After having analysed the letter through the lens of identity, I will introduce the alternative concept of belonging and demonstrate how the latter deepens our understanding of loyalties and affiliations after the experience of the deportation. The last two sections of the paper discuss how the prayer for the Babylonian city enables the addressees to create a new and confident self-understanding in relation to the non-deportee population – a struggle that is frequently observable in migrant or other minority communities.

1. *The Letter to the Exiles in its Literary and Historical Context*

To appreciate the Letter to the Exiles in its literary context, we need to be aware of the diversity of views on Babylonian rule throughout the book of Jeremiah.[3]

A clear rejection is depicted in the oracles against the nations, where the downfall of the Babylonian empire is celebrated (Jer 50-51). The conquest is described as a traumatizing experience for the population in and around Jerusalem (Jer 4; 5:15-17).[4] Despite the portrayal of the Babylonians as the political enemies of Judah, the Babylonians are rarely blamed for their cruelty. Here we can see the influence of Deuteronomistic theology on the book of Jeremiah. As in 2Kings 21:1-15, it is the Judean population and their kings themselves who cause their own suffering because they do not obey the commandments of YHWH (Jer 21:4-7; 44:2-6). The Babylonian conquerors are merely God's tool to put an end to the sins of Judah by destroying the social and administrative structures that used to give stability to the kingdom.[5]

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[2] For an elaboration of the terms «self-understanding» and «social location», see R. Brubaker / F. Cooper: Beyond ‹identity›, Theory and Society 29 (2000) 1–47, here 17–19; published again in: R. Brubaker: Ethnicity without Groups, Cambridge 2006, 28–63, here 44–45. On the Babylonian exile as forced migration see M.J. Boda et al. (ed.): The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 21, Atlanta 2015.
There has been an intensive debate whether it is appropriate to apply modern sociological theories to ancient societies. On this discussion, and the conditions under which research on migration can deepen our understanding of the Babylonian exile, see J.J. Ahn: Exile as Forced Migrations. A Sociological, Literary and Theological Approach on the Displacement and Resettlement of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, BZAW 417, Berlin 2011, 35–39.
Brad Kelle detects a general change in the study of the Babylonian exile since the 1980s. Instead of analysing the exile as a singular event, scholars have become more aware of exile as a phenomenon that can be studied by sociological, psychological, and anthropological methods; see B.E. Kelle: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exile, in: B.E. Kelle / F.R. Ames / J.L. Wright (ed.): Interpreting Exile. Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts, Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Israel and Its Literature 10, Leiden / Boston 2012, 5–38.

[3] For a closer analysis of the images of the Babylonian empire in the book of Jeremiah, see R.I. Thelle: Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah (MT). Negotiating a Power Shift, in: R.G. Kratz / H.M. Barstad (ed.): Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah, Berlin/New York 2009, 187–232; J. Hill: Friend or Foe? The figure of Babylon in the book of Jeremiah MT, Biblical Interpretation Series 40, Leiden 1999.

The end of these structures, however, does not imply the end of all life in Judah. According to Jeremiah, the nations (Jer 27:11) or individuals (21:8-9; 38:2-3; cf. 40:9) who accept Babylonian rule will live. For the poorest of Judean society, living conditions will even improve. Those who did not own any property before will be given vineyards and land (Jer 39:10).

Yet the most positive image of life under Babylonian rule is not the depiction of the inhabitants of Judah but rather of the deportees in Babylonia. The Letter to the Exiles (Jer 29:1-7) states:

> 1 These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.
> 2 This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.
> 3 The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said:
> 4 Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into

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[4] See also K.M. O'Connor: Jeremiah. Pain and Promise, Minneapolis 2011.

[5] For God and humans as simultaneous causes for historical events see I.L. Seeligmann: Menschliches Heldentum und göttliche Hilfe. Die doppelte Kausalität im alttestamentlichen Geschichtsdenken, in: I.L. Seeligmann / R. Smend / E. Blum (ed.): Gesammelte Studien zur Hebräischen Bibel, FAT 41, Tübingen 2004, 137–159.
On Deuteronomism in Jeremiah, see H.-J. Stipp: Probleme des redaktionsgeschichtlichen Modells der Entstehung des Jeremiabuches, in: W. Groß (ed.): Jeremia und die «deuteronomistische Bewegung», BBB 98, Weinheim 1995, 225–262. This article agrees with Stipp that it is not possible to differentiate «pre-deuteronomistic» from «deuteronomistic» literary layers in Jeremiah. This, of course, does not deny a strong correspondence between Jeremiah and DtrH.

exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:
5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.
6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.
7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The text takes a stance on the question of how to handle the situation of deportation and exile. Should the deportees try to oppose the new rulers, possibly even strive for a return to Judah, or should they accept the location that has been forced upon them as their new home?

We cannot be sure when the text was created. Many scholars consider it one of the older parts of the book of Jeremiah, as the struggle for a reaction to the exile indeed seems plausible in chronological proximity to the conquest.[6] For the purpose of the present article, what is important is not the specific date or location of composition, but the experiences and settings that are presupposed in the text. It is most likely that these experiences and settings also form the historical background of Jer 29:1-7.

Two observations are foundational to the (re)construction of a sociological situation that is reflected in the text:

1. The letter speaks to people who have been deported from Jerusalem to Babylon. By commanding them to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and procreate, it advises them to seek their future lives in Babylonia rather than in a return to Judah. The command to pray for the Babylonian city makes clear that the question of the whereabouts of the deportees is, in essence, a question about loyalties. By praying on behalf of the Babylonian city, the deportees assure themselves, the non-Judean population, and their rulers of their loyalty to their surrounding society.

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[6] See, for instance, Carolyn Sharp, who considers Jer 29:1-7 a document of pro-diaspora traditions after 597: C. Sharp: Prophecy and Ideology in Jeremiah. Struggles for Authority in Deutero-Jeremianic Prose, London 2003, 105–111; John J. Ahn sees the text as a work of the 1.5 generation, thus also a document of early exilic times; see Ahn: Exile as Forced Migrations (n. 2), 107-158. A voice that even considers the historical Jeremiah the author of Jer 29:4-7 is G. Wanke: Jeremia. Teilband 2 Jer 25,15-52,34, ZBK 20/2, Zürich 2003, 259–263. For an overview of positions which regard the text as an authentic letter of Jeremiah, see W. McKane: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah. Vol. II: Commentary on Jeremiah XXVI-LII, ICC, Edinburgh 1996, 744.

2. If it is necessary to command loyalty to the Babylonian city, it means that this loyalty is neither self-evident nor freely given. The book of Jeremiah identifies the opposite views through the figures of Hananiah and Shemaiah who claim that the deportees will return to Judah within a short time frame (Jer 28:1-4) and that the future is not to be sought in Babylonia (29:27-28). Thus, loyalty to the community of the Babylonian city is a struggle against the perception of distance or even opposition which seem to be strong tendencies among the deportees.

This article assumes that the Letter to the Exiles reflects the discussion of a community that struggles with a sense of ambivalence between loyalty and distance from the surrounding population similar to the deportees in the text. Such a struggle can only occur when persons have a sense of a «we» as a community that feels, at least in certain situations, distinguished from the rest of society. In this perspective, inhabitants of the city who are not considered members of the «we» are constructed as «others» or as «environment». It is likely, though not necessary, that such a self-perception arises in diaspora, when loyalty to a different place (i.e., Jerusalem or Judah) is an option. In this case, members of the migrant minority must negotiate loyalties to two different locations and their respective networks.

Sociological research points out that questions about affiliations and networks as well as values and lifestyle are usually raised when persons experience major changes in life. Contrary to this, they rarely arise when social structures remain intact over a long period of time. Such a fundamental destruction of former ties is often caused by migration, but it can also occur without physical movement due to political uprisings, individual biographies, or other reasons.[7]

For the sociological background of the Letter to the Exiles, this means that the text resembles struggles over loyalties of persons who perceive themselves as a collective that is distinguishable from the rest of society. The fact that these struggles occur implies that the people in question have experienced major changes in its social structures, caused possibly by deportation, by other forms of migration, by political upheavals, or by rapid economic developments. The community behind the text either projects its own struggles onto the first generation of exiles in Babylonia or is contemporaneous with it.

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[7] In the 20th and 21st centuries, this phenomenon is intensified by processes that are generally called «postmodernism» and «globalisation». Thus, even without physical movement, assumptions and beliefs as well as networks and affiliations are constantly contested by influences from different parts of the world; see R. Eickelpasch / C. Rademacher: Identität, Bielefeld 2004, 5–9. This is also true for biblical times, albeit to a much lesser degree: The ascent of new empires along with trade or changing local powers have always challenged former worldviews as well as political and social structures. Nevertheless, in ancient times and today, the destruction of frameworks and, following that, the questioning of assumptions, values, and loyalties, are experienced most strongly in contexts of migration.

2. The Letter to the Exiles in the Light of Identity

To describe the construction of a «we-group» in biblical texts, scholars frequently use the sociological and psychological concept of identity, or derivative terms such as «collective identity», «group identity», or «community identity».[8] Such analyses are often based on the sociological insight that identity is formed vis-à-vis the other. Thus, a group defines itself by declaring who does *not* belong to it and is considered an outsider. Consequently, biblical Israel was, and sometimes still is, perceived predominantly by the definition of who is *not* Israel.[9]

For the situation in the Babylonian exile, this model imagines Judeans and Babylonians as clearly defined and separated entities. Judeans perceive themselves as a more or less coherent group, defined by the cult of YHWH, the figure of a Davidic king, a connection to the land of Judah, and a common descent among other shared particular and, thus, identifying elements. Arriving in Babylonia, they experience the local population as clearly distinguishable from themselves by those same characteristics of cult, king, land, language, and more. In other words, the Judeans are foreigners in Babylonia, and the Babylonians are foreigners to them.[10] According to this view, the Letter to the Exiles aims to bridge the gap between these deeply divided groups by encouraging the Judeans to create social ties not only within the Judean community but also to the Babylonian community. However, reading the text through the lens of identity, the basic differentiation between Judeans and Babylonians is not questioned by the command to seek the welfare of the city. Even when cooperating, it remains clear who is a Babylonian and who is a Judean. The only aspect that might challenge the dichotomic picture of Babylonians and Judeans is the command to marry and have children in Jer 29:6. There has been a long debate as to whether this verse refers to Judean or mixed marriages.[11] If the latter is the case, would this not mean that the boundaries between the two peoples are blurred from the second generation onwards? This might be true, yet the term «mixed marriages» itself presupposes that there are two distinguishable groups that can be mixed, at least in the generation that is addressed in the letter. Thus, the scholarly concept of mixed marriages strengthens rather than challenges the concept of identity as the establishment of well-defined boundaries.

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[8] For a recent example, see Gary N. Knoppers and Kennetz A. Ristau, who choose the term «community identity» in the title of their volume and seem to use «collective identity» and «group identity» interchangeably; G.N. Knoppers / K.A. Ristau: Community Identity in Judean Historiography. Biblical and Comparative Perspectives, Winona Lake, IN, 2009, 1. Kristin Weingart employs «collective identity» to refer to biblical Israel; see K. Weingart: What Makes an Israelite an Israelite? Judean Perspectives on the Samarians in the Persian Period, JSOT 42 (2017) 155-175, here 156.
For overviews of the history of identity discourses in theology and bible studies, see M. Vogel: Modelle jüdischer Identitätsbildung in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit, in: M. Öhler (ed.): Religionsgemeinschaft und Identität: Prozesse jüdischer und christlicher Identitätsbildung im Rahmen der Antike, Biblisch-theologische Studien 142, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2013, 44–46, and Chr. Strecker: Identität im frühen Christentum?, ibid., 142–156.

[9] For example, see E. Schwarz: Identität durch Abgrenzung, EHS 23/162, Frankfurt a.M. 1982; Marianne Grohmann states: «Identitätsfragen kommen vor allem dort zur Sprache, wo es um Abgrenzung von Anderen geht.» (M. Grohmann: Diskontinuität und Kontinuität in alttestamentlichen Identitätskonzepten, in: Öhler: Religionsgemeinschaft und Identität [n. 8], 17–42, here 22).

3. The Concept of Belonging

The notion of identity has been increasingly criticized in recent years, as it evokes the image of a stable concept with a clear differentiation between inside and outside. In contrast, sociological studies have emphasized the fluidity and situatedness of people's self-designations. In addition, the term «collective identity» implies a coherence among a number of persons that is more propaganda than a description of real social relations.[12]

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[10] Nowadays, even scholars who employ the model of identity to describe biblical Israel agree that identity is not a given fact but a matter of negotiation and adaptation. Nevertheless, publications on the topic frequently speak of Israel or Judeans as though these entities formed a continuous line from the Iron Age throughout Babylonian and Persian times, and onwards. See, for example, Sara Japhet, who states: «The people of Israel's awareness of their own identity is a constant feature of biblical thought», S. Japhet: From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah. Collected Studies on the Restoration Period, Winona Lake, IN, 2006, 96.

[11] For this discussion, see G. Fischer: Jeremia 26-52, HThKAT, Freiburg 2005, 93; Ahn: Exile as Forced Migrations (n. 2), 138–140.

[12] For a summary of criticism on the term collective identity, see Strecker: Identität im frühen Christentum? (n. 8), 136–141.

Therefore, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, among others, suggests that it is more accurate to describe people's loyalties and social locations by the model of belonging instead of identity. She points out that:

> «‹Identity› is a categorial concept while belonging combines categorisation with social relation. Identity is relational in the sense that it positions itself vis-à-vis the other. Belonging's relationality consists in forging and maintaining social ties and in buttressing commitments and obligations. Identity caters to dichotomous characterisations of the social while belonging *rather* highlights its situatedness and the multiplicity of parameters forging commonality, mutuality and attachments. Identity relies on sharp boundary-drawing, particularism, and is prone to buttressing social divisiveness.»[13]

Pfaff-Czarnecka also differentiates the concept of belonging into two aspects which are more clearly distinguishable in the German language: belonging (Zugehörigkeit), on the one hand, as «an individual's belonging to a collective»; and togetherness (Zusammengehörigkeit), on the other, as the shared perception of a group as belonging together.[14]

Furthermore, belonging is not an exclusive concept. A person can develop a sense of belonging to different groups simultaneously: to a nationality; to a local community of a city, suburb, or village; to a religious community; to a family; to a sports club; and to a team of colleagues at work. Depending on the situation, a person will name different forms of belonging as relevant, and hardly any of them are mutually exclusive. Applying these observations to the Letter to the Exiles will modify our perception of Babylonians and Judeans as two clearly separated and antagonistic units.

4. The Formation of Belonging in the Letter to the Exiles

In Jer 29:4 a number of people is addressed as «all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon». Classical identity concepts would assume that the verse describes the encounter of two groups who have always had a sense of their distinctiveness, hence an understanding of themselves as Judeans or Babylonians in opposition to other peoples. The physical encounter between both groups might raise new questions and problems, but self-designations would not be greatly affected by this experience. The deportees' relation to the Babylonian community would be secondary in chronology as well as importance. The addressees would primarily be and remain Judeans, possibly Judeans who also form some ties to the Babylonian inhabitants of the city.

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[13] J. Pfaff-Czarnecka: From ‹Identity› to ‹Belonging› in Social Research. Plurality, Social Boundaries, and the Politics of the Self, in: S. Albiez et al. (ed.): Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging. Practices, Theory and Spatial Dimensions, Madrid 2011, 203, highlight in the original.

[14] Pfaff-Czarnecka: From ‹Identity› to ‹Belonging› (n. 13), 201–202.

In contrast to this reading of identity, the model of belonging turns our focus to a formation of networks and loyalties that is more complex. The addressees of the letter are designated *golah*, the «exiles» (v. 4). In other words, the feature that defines the addressees' sensation of togetherness is the experience of being deported from Jerusalem to Babylonia. As I pointed out above, questions of belonging are only raised when former social frameworks are lost. It is questionable whether the addressees had any sense of togetherness prior to their deportation. From the outset they would have shared many characteristics such as language, geographical area, king, and YHWH worship, but these features would gain relevance for people's self-understanding only when questioned by the encounter with persons who speak different languages, live in different areas, serve a different king, and worship other deities. This happens most radically after migration. While the deportees lived in Jerusalem or Judah, different forms of belonging may have shaped their lives, depending on specific situations and context. Such belongings could have been family, neighbourhood, or cooperation in endeavours in agricultural production, trade, cult, etc. The relevance of certain networks would have differed according to one's social location; for example, loyalty to a Davidic king was probably more decisive for high court officials than for persons from rural areas whose lives were not influenced greatly by the question to which king they paid their taxes. Similarly, the adoration of YHWH was certainly a crucial factor for the self-understanding of priests but probably less so for laypeople who might have even worshipped other gods besides YHWH (e.g., in domestic cults). In short, there was probably not a single set of characteristics that was equally important to all inhabitants of Judah and that could have served as a basis for a strong and stable perception of togetherness as a coherent group of Judeans.

This assumption corresponds with Rogers Brubaker's deliberations on modern conflicts which are designated «ethnic». He points out that scholars should not describe such conflicts as struggles between «groups». Instead, academic analyses should focus on specific actors (individuals or organisations) who evoke the formation of such «groups» by certain means and with certain aims. These actors claim to legitimately speak for their «group» although the members of the supposed group are always more diverse and their relation to the representatives is always more ambiguous than these representatives or leaders have an interest to admit.[15]

If we apply Brubaker's observations to biblical studies, it means that we need to be aware not to speak of primordial and coherent collectives called, for example, Israel, Judeans, or Yahwists. Instead, we need to ask who creates these entities under which circumstances and with what motives. The fact that there were certain biblical authors or tradents who discussed the questions of who belongs to Israel, to the community of YHWH worshippers, etc. does not mean that these were the relevant forms of belonging for all, or even the majority of, people who were supposed to be included in or excluded from this group. In Jer 29:1-7 in particular, the binding factor for a group formation does not seem to be the designation as Judeans, a term which is not used in the text at all,[16] but the experience of deportation, which is referred to frequently (v. 1-4; 7). It even defines the addressees of the letter explicitly, as they are called *golah* and not Judeans (v. 1; 4).

Thus, the text does not speak generally to Judeans who form a coherent and stable group before and after the deportation in opposition to Babylonians. Rather, their sense of togetherness is developed only when they are led away from Judah and resettled in Babylonia. Additional features of this group are mentioned throughout the text. (1) It is structured by certain social divisions («the remaining elders among the exiles», «the priests», «the prophets», and «all the people», v. 1). (2) Jerusalem is its designated place of origin and orientation (rather than Judah).[17] (3) The prayer to YHWH is mentioned as its basic ritual (v. 7).

To summarize, the letter speaks to persons whose sense of togetherness is constructed by the fact that they have been forced to leave their homes and build up new lives in Babylonia. Features that have held varying degrees of relevance to different persons in Judah become the main characteristics of this community: the division of the group into different social statuses, the relationship to Jerusalem, and the prayer to YHWH. Therefore, the experience of the deportation evokes a new form of belonging. Strangers who used to locate themselves in different networks in Judah and Jerusalem now develop a feeling of togetherness that is shaped by common features which are (supposedly) acknowledged by all its members as characteristics of the group. In contrast to traditional identity theories, the binding factor between the addressees is not the fact that they are, and always have been, Judeans. It is the fact that they share a common experience which causes them to redefine their loyalties and social orientations. The deportation has created a feeling of togetherness that most likely did not exist in Judah. The designation as exiles implies that being in Babylonia is part of their self-understanding and the basis for their sense of togetherness.[18]

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[15] R. Brubaker: Ethnicity without Groups, in: R. Brubaker: Ethnicity without Groups, Cambridge 2004, 7–27.

[16] In general, Judah is only mentioned to define the official functions of the leaders and the king («leaders of Judah and Jerusalem», v. 2, and «King Zedekiah of Judah», v. 3). For the rest of the addressees, the kingdom of Judah does not seem a relevant point of reference.

[17] Jerusalem is mentioned five times throughout the letter and, in contrast to Judah, not only as part of the designation of state officials. In the Masoretic text, the focus on the Babylonian city (v. 7) might indicate a parallelism between Jerusalem and the Babylonian cities, this way highlighting the focus on Jerusalem once more. This parallelism is missing in the Septuagint, as the latter commands the addressees to seek the welfare of the land (ζητήσατε εἰς εἰρήνην τῆς γῆς, Jer 36:7LXX), not the city.

The letter commands the addressees to build houses, plant gardens, multiply, seek the welfare of the city, and pray on its behalf to YHWH. By saying this, the letter also evokes another form of belonging. This belonging refers to the population of the Babylonian city. In comparison to the descriptions of the Babylonian military campaigns in Jer 2-24, a different relationship is portrayed here. The Babylonians are not represented as the cruel and violent enemies who deprived their victims of homes and social bonds. They are simply the neighbours one has to live with. In other words, the Babylonians are not portrayed as a coherent group that is collectively responsible for war and deportation. In v. 1, the text mentions Nebuchadnezzar as the initiator of the deportation, not «the Babylonians» in general. Nebuchadnezzar is named as the cause of Judean suffering; the deportees are not called to seek any sense of belonging to his military regime or to pray for him. However, the population of the Babylonian city does not necessarily have a share in his acts of violence. They should be seen as neighbours, and peace or welfare can only be achieved together with them.

Therefore, the command to pray for the city expresses two forms of belonging at the same time. It is a prayer *for the city,* so one way of belonging refers to the group of inhabitants of the city without regard to their place of origin, language, or cult. All of them should form a community that seeks a peaceful life together.

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[18] This, of course, does not mean that all the deportees referred to this situation as positively as the letter. A number of them might have rejected Babylonian rule and striven to return to their former homes in Jerusalem or Judah. Nevertheless, if they consider themselves part of a group called golah, being in Babylonia seems to be a major aspect of their self-understanding, even if this fact is expressed mainly in the attempt to change the current situation by revolt or return to Judah.

The second part of the command speaks of a prayer *to YHWH*. This creates an awareness of belonging to the group of deportees who keep praying to the same God they used to worship at the temple of Jerusalem. Thus, the command «pray on behalf of the city to YHWH» summarizes the multiple forms of belonging which are evoked in the letter: «pray on behalf of the city» refers to belonging to the population of the city; «pray to YHWH» strengthens the sense of togetherness among the persons who have been deported from Jerusalem to Babylonia. There is no primary belonging to the Judeans that is complemented by a secondary relation to Babylonians. Both forms of belonging, belonging to the community of exiles and to the community of the Babylonian city, originate in the same experience of deportation and resettlement.

Of course, the formation of belonging is never a one-sided process. Whether a person can develop a sense of belonging to a certain group depends not only on their own decisions but also on the question of whether a group allows them access to it. Consequently, belonging is not always a result of one's own choice but also of attributes assigned by others. Belonging can either be denied or forced on people. This often happens in migration contexts – a majority ascribes values, affiliations, and a certain social status to persons they consider members of a minority group, often without regard as to whether this categorisation from the outside meets the person's self-understanding or loyalties. Thus, questions of belonging become a political issue, as the struggle over belonging is a struggle over the power to define oneself or to be defined by others.[19] In this sense, the prayer on behalf of the city can be regarded as an empowering act by the deportee minority who reclaims the right to self-determination instead of being defined solely by the military authorities who controlled their lives during war and deportation.

5. The Prayer on Behalf of the City as Empowerment

There has certainly been an asymmetry of power between the long-established inhabitants of the city and the newly settled deportees. To use the words of the text, the former had already built their houses and planted their gardens long ago, whereas the latter have to build up their basis for life all over again. Like any new minority within a larger society, they are dependent on the mercy of the majority.

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[19] Nira Yuval-Davis calls this «the politics of belonging»; N. Yuval-Davis: Belonging and the politics of belonging, Patterns of Prejudice 40/3 (2006) 197–214, here 203.

The Letter to the Exiles challenges this axis of power. It is vital for our analysis to mark that Jer 29:7 commands a prayer from the deportee community not only for itself but for the entire city and, thus, also for the non-deportee inhabitants. Therefore, the deportees' prayer to YHWH is assumed to have a positive impact on persons who do not belong to their community and who do not worship YHWH. As a result, the command to pray for the welfare of the Babylonian city implies that, despite the dependency of the deportee community on the Babylonian population, there is also a dependency the other way around. Both groups' well-being is understood to be dependent on the actions of YHWH. And since the deportees are the only inhabitants of the city who have a relationship and means of communication to this God, the prayer to YHWH is the specific contribution to public life which this group alone can make.

By praying on behalf of the city, the deportees refuse to see themselves solely as war victims whose fate lies in the hands of people who are more powerful than they are. The prayer implies that they can take their life into their own hands, that they can influence their own lives and those of the city's inhabitants for the better. It is a measure for the deportees to regain control over their own actions, their loyalties, and their self-understanding.

6. Building and Planting as a Result of «Living in Between»

Migration destroys social frameworks and shakes former beliefs, values, and assumptions. This often evokes a deep feeling of insecurity and loss. Reactions to this experience are manifold. Two extreme forms are either traditionalism, where a person attempts to re-establish the old order (or whatever they imagine it to have been) or a high degree of assimilation to the new environment, where the individual tries to abandon all ties to their former life.[20] Ideally, persons do not feel the need to choose between the old and the new networks. In this case, a person can build up new relations by developing a sense of belonging to several social bodies at the same time. Thus, belonging to a new community of a city, village, or country in no ways contradicts loyalty to persons in the area one has left. Homi

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[20] Eickelpasch / Rademacher: Identität (n. 7), 9. Homi Bhabha points out that the experience of anxiety must always be incorporated into the analysis of the borderline existence between two or more cultures; H. Bhabha: The Location of Culture, London/New York 2010, 305–306.

Bhabha calls this living «in between» or living in a «third space». He points out that despite all dangers of uncertainty and instability, living «in between» can also become a source of inspiration and creativity.[21] Ideally, commitment to several world views and interpretations can lead to the creation of a new and constructive self-image, to a perspective for one's own life and to new aims or a new purpose.

Such a process is evoked in the Letter to the Exiles. This can be seen in the use of the verbs «building» and «planting» in v. 5. Jeremiah commands the deportees to «build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce». The combination of the verbs «building» (בנה) and «planting» (נטע) occurs ten times in the book of Jeremiah. The subjects of the verbs are always either God or humans who act in the name of God.[22] When the phrase is used as a metaphor, the objects that are built and planted are either Israel or Judah or kingdoms in general.[23] One example can be found in Jer 18:7-10. Here, YHWH says,

> 7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,
> 8 but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.
> 9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it,
> 10 but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

God alone rules the world by breaking down and destroying nations but also by building and planting them. The exiles do not have the power nor the means to do so themselves. They cannot build and plant nations and kingdoms as God can. But they can build houses and plant gardens. In other words, they can do on a small scale what God does on a bigger scale – create new life and new structures by building and planting.[24] The command to build houses and plant gardens is therefore not a command to ignore politics and only care about one's private life. It gives the deportees the ability to take part in God's worldwide actions. To use Homi Bhabha's words, the experience of living «in between», belonging both to the group of deportees and the population of the Babylonian city, is a source of inspiration. Life «in between» provides the deportees with the means to find a new purpose in history – to build and plant new life among the nations in the name of YHWH.[25]

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[21] Bhabha: The Location of Culture (n. 20), 307–311.

[22] God is the subject in Jer 18:7-10; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10 and 45:4. Human subjects can be Jeremiah (1:10), the deportees (29:5.28), or the Rehabites (Jer 35:7). A combination of God and Israel can be found in Jer 31:4-5.

[23] Israel and Judah are the objects of God's building and planting in Jer 31:28. Judah is addressed in 42:10 and 45:4, and Israel in 31:4-5. In 24:6, the focus lies specifically on the exiles. Kingdoms and nations in general are the objects in Jer 1:10 and 18:7-10. A literal meaning of building and planting can be found in Jer 29:5.28 (houses and gardens) and in 35:7 (house and vineyard).

It is important to bear in mind that the Letter to the Exiles is not a description of the social reality in Babylonia. It is a programme or an ideal that does not provide us with information as to whether the historical deportees and their descendants described themselves and their environment in the way the letter describes. To access the realities of the historical Yahwists in Babylonia, we need to look into less tendentious sources such as the administrative documents from Al Yahudu or, for the Persian period, from the Murashu archive.[26] In these sources, we find persons with Yahwistic names who are well established in economic and social networks of the respective empires. This might indicate that a number of persons indeed perceived themselves in a similar way as the Letter to the Exiles proclaims: embracing loyalties both to the community of Yahwists from the Levant and to the non-Yahwistic Babylonian society. Nevertheless, the sources are too limited to draw definite conclusions about the variety of self-understandings and social locations of deportees and their offspring in Babylonia.[27] The fact that questions of belonging and loyalty needed to be negotiated in texts like the Letter to the Exiles implies that these questions were open. Different opinions and approaches probably competed, as represented in Jeremiah's struggle with Hananiah (Jer 28) and Shemaiah (Jer 29:24-32) as well as with unnamed prophets (Jer 27:9; 29:8-9). Therefore, the Letter to the Exiles is valuable not as a source for the historical situation in Babylonia but as one voice among others in the polyphonic struggle of Yahwists about questions of belonging and loyalty to different networks that coexisted and needed to be reconciled.

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[24] See G.L. Keown / P.L. Scalise / Th.G. Smothers: Jeremiah 26-52, WBC 27, Waco 1995, 71.

[25] Here the intention of the letter concurs with the story of Abraham who is sent out by God to bring blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1-3).

[26] For the Murashu Archive, see H.V. Hilprecht / A.T. Clay: Business Documents of Murashû Sons of Nippur: Dated in the Reign of Artaxerxes II (464-424 B.C.). The Babylonian Expedition of the University of Philadelphia (A,9), Philadelphia, PA, 1898; A.T. Clay, Business Documents of Murashû Sons of Nippur: Dated in the Reign of Artaxerxes II (464-424 B.C.), The Babylonian Expedition of the University of Philadelphia (A,10), Philadelphia, PA, 1904; M.W. Stolper: Entrepreneurs and Empire. The Murašû Archive, the Murašû Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia, Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul 54, Leiden 1985. For documents from the 6th-5th century, see L.E. Pearce / C. Wunsch: Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer, Cornell University studies in Assyriology and Sumerology 28, Bethesda, MD, 2014. A major problem in the study of the Al Yahudu tablets is their unknown origin and their questionable chain of ownership. On the methodical and ethical questions regarding the use of unprovenanced material such as the Al Yahudu tablets, see: T. Alstola: Judeans in Babylonia. A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 109 (2020) 39–43.

7. Summary

Although the Letter to the Exiles seems to address the deportees as a clearly defined group in opposition to the Babylonian environment, closer analysis reveals a much more faceted mosaic of commitment and engagement in different social networks.

On the one hand, a sense of togetherness among the deportees is shaped. This commonality is characterised by the shared experience of war, violence, and the loss of the homeland. It is also developed by the awareness of the lasting relationship to the God YHWH. By praying to YHWH on behalf of the Babylonian city, the deportees find a way to preserve their relationship to this God anywhere they live, despite the loss of the Jerusalem temple.[28]

On the other hand, another form of belonging is created – belonging to the population of the Babylonian city. The Babylonian neighbours are not seen as enemies. In the vision of the letter, Babylonians and the newly arrived deportees form a community where each depends on the other, and this challenges an axis of power that would have been likely to exist between the two groups. The command to pray for the city is a refusal to leave the deportees in the status of war victims. It tells them to accept the new conditions, but more than that, it encourages them to see themselves not as objects in the actions of powerful rulers, but as subjects who can influence the course of their own lives and their environment. The prayer to their God on behalf of the city is the special contribution that the deportees, and only they, can make to the welfare of the city.

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[27] Two main difficulties occur when we try to use these administrative documents as a source for the social realities of the deportees and their descendants: (1) We can only identify Yahwists or West Semites by their names. If they bear common Babylonian names, they are not distinguishable for us. Thus, our information is always biased because we can only discern those who presumably kept some affiliation to their Yahwist/Levantine heritage, not those who abandoned it. (2) Official documents depict only a small portion of every-day life, mainly of an urban upper-class. They are not representative for the full range of living conditions and lifestyles of the deportees or their offspring. See: Alstola: Judeans in Babylonia (n. 26), 47–57 and 252–254.

[28] W.H. Schmidt: Das Buch Jeremia: Kapitel 21-52, ATD 21, Göttingen 2013, 100–101.

The shift from identity to belonging helps us to focus on complex and simultaneous social relations. The deportees do not face a strict dichotomy between return and assimilation, between Judean and Babylonian life. Instead, they can regain control over their lives by the conscious recognition of their specific contributions and purpose as those who build up loyalties and affiliations to several networks at the same time. Thus, despite all uncertainties and the precarities of migration and even more so of forced migration, the Letter to the Exiles opens up new perspectives by depicting an ideal way to master life «in between».

Abstract

Der große Einfluss, den das babylonische Exil auf die Entstehung biblischer Texte hatte, ist in der Forschung unumstritten. In jüngster Zeit werden die Erfahrungen der Deportation aus Juda und der Neuansiedelung in Babylonien jedoch vermehrt unter neuem Blickwinkel untersucht, indem sie als Formen von (erzwungener) Migration gedeutet werden. Dies eröffnet die Möglichkeit, die Exegese von biblischen Exilstexten mit soziologischen Erkenntnissen aus der Migrationsforschung zu verbinden. Der sogenannte «Brief an die Exilierten» in Jer 29,1-7 ist für eine solche Lesart besonders geeignet, da er Fragen nach Loyalitäten und sozialen Orientierungen aufwirft, wie sie im Kontext von Migration häufig auftreten. Sie werden in der soziologischen Forschung traditionell als «Identitätsfragen» behandelt. Der Begriff der «Identität» geriet in den letzten Jahren jedoch zunehmend in die Kritik. Alternative Konzepte wurden entwickelt. Für die Analyse des «Briefs an die Exilierten» besonders ertragreich ist das Modell der Zugehörigkeit bzw. Zusammengehörigkeit, welches die Dichotomie von «uns» in Abgrenzung zu «den anderen» überwindet und stattdessen die Vielfalt sozialer Bezugsgrößen im Rahmen von Migrationserfahrungen aufzeigt. Der vorliegende Aufsatz legt dar, inwiefern das Konzept der Zugehörigkeit unseren Blick dafür schärft, auf welch komplexe Weise der «Brief an die Exilierten» Loyalitäten zu verschiedenen Netzwerken aufbaut, das positive Potential der Jhwh-Gemeinde in Babylonien herausstellt und damit die Deportationserfahrung konstruktiv verarbeitet.

The extensive impact of the Babylonian exile on the production of biblical texts has long been acknowledged. In recent years, the experience of deportation from Judah to Babylonia has increasingly been recognised as a form of (forced) migration that can be analysed by sociological methods of migration studies. This article uses the so-called Letter to the Exiles in Jer 29:1-7 as an example to analyse how Yahwistic diaspora communities discussed questions of affiliations and loyalties which are typical for migration contexts. Such questions are often associated with concepts of identity. However, sociologists have increasingly criticised the idea of identity. Alternative models have been proposed. Especially insightful for the analysis of the Letter to the Exiles is the concept of belonging which highlights the diversity of social networks in migration contexts, rather than establishing a dichotomic picture of «us» vs. «the others».

This paper demonstrates how the shift from identity to belonging enhances our understanding of the Letter to the Exiles. It reveals how the biblical text detects the potential and the resources of Yahwist communities in Babylonia by creating loyalties to different networks simultaneously.

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