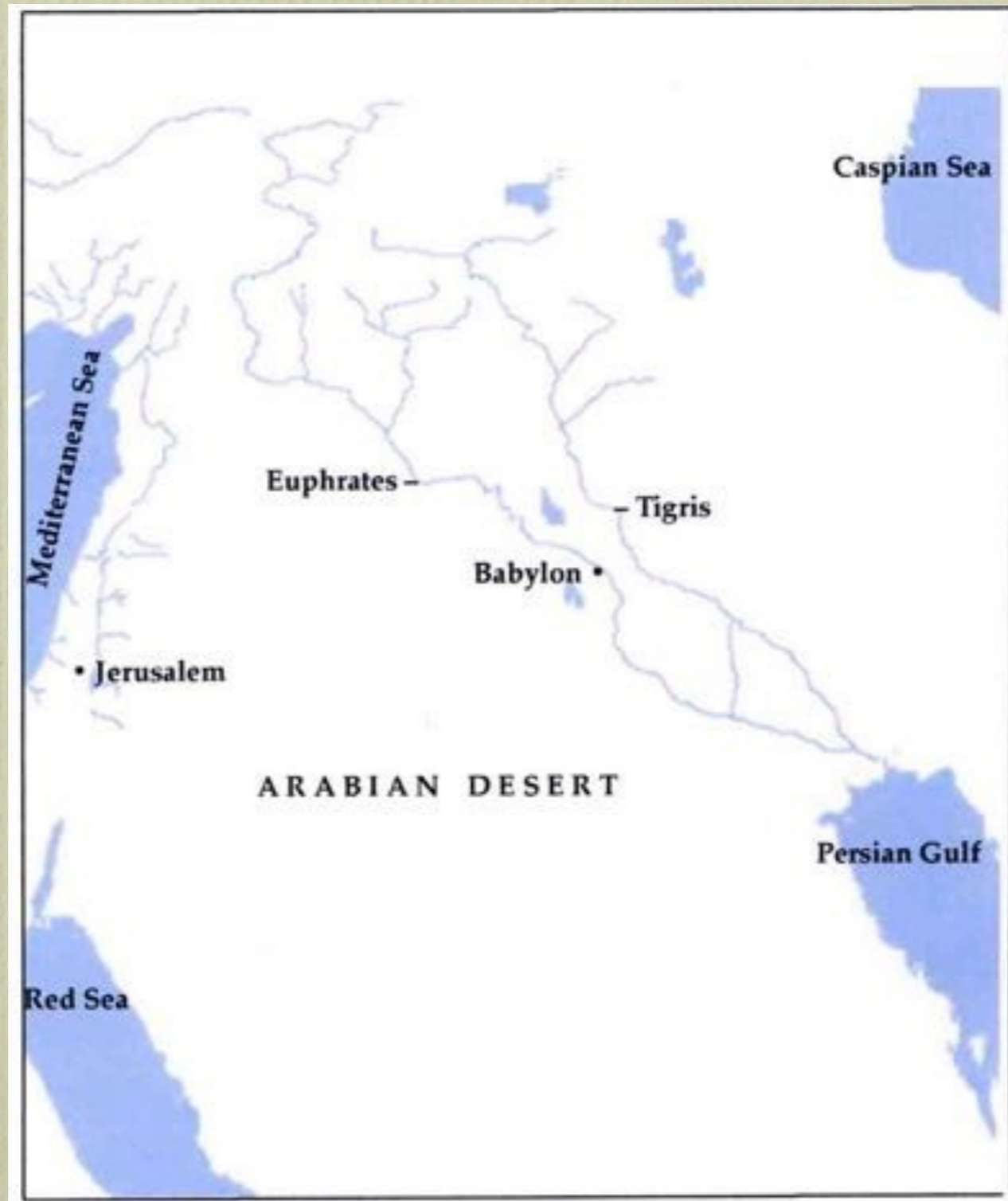


## 04. Exile in Babylon 597 -538



## from the Babylonian Chronicles

‘In the seventh year, the month of Kislev [18 Dec 598 – 15 Jan 597], the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land, and encamped against the city of Judah [Jerusalem] and on the second day of the month of Ada [March 16, 597] he seized the city and captured the king [Jehoiachin]. He appointed there a king of his own choice [Zedekiah], received its heavy tribute and sent them to Babylon.’



597 - King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem. King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), the leaders and artisans were taken as hostages and deported. Jehoiachin retained his kingly status and was released while still in Exile in 561BC , the year after the death of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:27-30). The records of the number taken into exile vary:

2 Kings 24:14 speaks of 10,000;

2 Kings 24:16 speaks of 7,000 + 1,000 craftsmen;

Jeremiah 52:28 speaks of 3,023 from Judah

(need to add citizens of Jerusalem?)

75% of population stayed behind in Judah (F&S page 306)

The Babylonian Exile demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances that they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701 – the Babylonian army had razed YHWH's city to the ground. Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, they had lost their king.

Despite their belief that the temple was the house of their God, YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national, institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic success.

In Babylon, they found themselves living in what was, in many ways, a superior culture, but not religiously. The concept of monotheism (there is only one God), as distinct from monolatry (among the gods only YHWH is to be worshipped) began to emerge (see Isaiah 44:6-23; 45:18-25), as well as a sense of their missionary vocation (see Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:6). Instead of identifying themselves in relation to the Davidic dynasty, they began to see themselves as a community defined by worship.

In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray. This was the beginning of the institution of the synagogue, which has remained central to Judaism ever since. They had to ask themselves how the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy could have happened.

It was impossible for them to contemplate the possibility that their God, YHWH, was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians. So they concluded that it must have been their God who brought about the catastrophe that they were experiencing. Since God is just, the problem had to be their infidelity to their part of the covenant, and they interpreted their loss and suffering as God's punishment for their sin, as God's way of purifying them.



Where had they gone wrong? What must they do to bring about the purification without which they could not enjoy God's blessing? These are some of the questions that were being asked by a number of different 'Schools' during the long years of exile. We are left to imagine the dialogue, debate and discussion that went on between them as they struggled to make sense of what had happened to them.

## The prophet Jeremiah (627-587BC)

The bulk of Jeremiah's oracles are located in the reigns of Jehoiakim (609-598) and Zedekiah (597-587).

Jeremiah's was a lone voice, and his contemporaries dismissed him and his 'oracles' as the ravings of a religious crank. Moreover, there was no lack of self-acclaimed 'prophets' who kept reassuring the people that it was impossible for Jerusalem to fall, since its security was guaranteed by YHWH. Jeremiah kept insisting that their security depended on their fidelity. No one wanted to listen to him.

In 597 the Babylonian army captured Jerusalem and the leaders were taken into exile.

Zedekiah kept vacillating between submission to Babylon and courting favour with Egypt. In 588 the Babylonian army again laid siege to the city. This time they showed no mercy. The city was burnt and the temple razed to the ground. More people were taken into exile. It was the end of an era. Judah, the last of the tribes of Israel, was utterly devastated. It was Jeremiah's lot to minister as a prophet during the terrible final years of Judah's decline. This accounts for the unrelenting criticism of the policies that led to the disasters of 597 and 587, and the dire warnings of divine punishment that all but fill his scroll.

To read the Jeremiah scroll we need to put ourselves among the exiles in Babylon as they tried to grasp what they understood as YHWH's will in using the Babylonians to humble Judah. We need to picture the elders, the priests, and scholars of various 'Schools', struggling to understand what had gone wrong. Jeremiah's oracles would have been an important source for their reflections, and their insights are incorporated into the scroll. Some of these insights are expressed in homiletic form, aimed at inspiring the other exiles to learn from Jeremiah. As one would expect, the homilies expressed what YHWH had revealed to Jeremiah by drawing out the implications of Jeremiah's words in ways that connected with the exiles' experience.

## Jeremiah 1:1-3

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah,  
of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin,

Abiathar, the last chief priest of Eli's family, was exiled to his estate at Anathoth for having supported a rival of Solomon (see 1 Kings 2:26).

to whom the word of YHWH came in the days of King Josiah  
son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. [627]

It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah,  
[609-598]

and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah  
of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. [587]

[598-587]

## The Jeremiah Scroll

R. P. Carroll in his *The Book of Jeremiah* (SCM Press 1986, page 49) states:

‘Few exegetes agree on the weight to be given to the role of the editors in the production of the book, and there is no consensus of scholarly opinion on such matters as the extent to which the Deuteronomists worked on the different levels of tradition, the relation between the poetry and the prose, the connections between a ‘historical’ Jeremiah, and the tradition, the figure of Baruch as amanuensis, biographer, creator of this tradition or creation of one level of the tradition, and the dating of the book and its parts.’

The second century BC Septuagint Greek Version of Jeremiah is shorter than the Masoretic Hebrew text by as much as a seventh, and points to a shorter Hebrew original.

Some of the longer Hebrew text may have already existed in other manuscripts, but it is likely that parts of the Hebrew text post-date the Septuagint, and that the formation of the Hebrew text as we have it was still going on into the second century BC. Generation after generation of scribes continued to be fascinated by the clarity of Jeremiah's warnings, but even more so by his conviction of the passionate love of YHWH for his people.

Another significant difference between the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Septuagint Greek text is the position and sequence of the **Oracles against the Nations**. These are at the end of the Hebrew scroll (Jeremiah 46-51), whereas the Septuagint has them from 25:14 to 32:24.



Perhaps the best way to visualise the growth of the scroll is to think of Jeremiah's usually short statements, typically in poetic rhythm, as triggering comment, typically, but not necessarily, in prose, and that this added material in turn triggered further comment, all with the aim of seeing and conveying the significance of Jeremiah's words in the changed circumstances of later generations.

Accepting that there is as yet no consensus among Jeremiah scholars, I am dividing the scroll into three parts.

In Part One (chapters 2-25) we start with an expectation that the poetic sections represent Jeremiah's oracles as edited by later scribes. We will reflect on this Part in full (Presentations 5-11)

Following the Septuagint positioning, Part Two consists in the Oracles against the Nations (Hebrew text chapter 25:15-38 and chapters 46-51). Here we start with an expectation that the prose material and the poetic oracles against the nations represent attempts by later scribes to apply Jeremiah's insights to their changed circumstances. (We will not reflect on this Part)

Part Three (Hebrew text chapter chapters 26 to 45) recounts the life and times of Jeremiah. We assume they are a later creation. We will select from Part Three in Presentation 12.

Two-thirds of Part One (chapters 2-25) consist in declarations of the **divine punishment** that was coming upon Judah because of the people's infidelity, and the whole of Part Two (chapter 25:15-38 and chapters 46-51) consists in declarations of the divine punishment that would be inflicted on the surrounding pagan nations. Together these sections on punishment make up just under **half the entire scroll**.