

“Territory and Identity: The Beginnings and Beyond”¹

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A Double Disclaimer

My personal location contains nothing worth noting for anybody apart from my family, my friends and me. However, it would serve as an explanation of why and how I understand the Genesis and beyond binary oppositions of land/exile, own territory/diasporas, promise/actuality, exodus/conquest. I shall articulate the personal at the end of this study, pointing out clearly how my personal situation influences my reading.

Territorial population shifts, especially when experienced as involuntary, are a hot topic in the current global, supposedly postcolonial world [dis]order. It is therefore hardly surprising that concepts of exile in the Hebrew bible have received much attention in the last two decades. This article is not intended as a survey of the recent scholarly literature on this politically hot topic. Rather, it presents personal reflections—not necessarily new, not necessarily original—on a vexed and vexing cluster of questions.

General Considerations

One of the Hebrew bible’s chief underlying motifs is the locale, the territory, and how matters relating to it are conceptualized. Working backwards from loss of territory control, that is, from the destruction of Judah, perhaps also of the Northern

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Kingdom, the loss of *control* over a certain territory, that is, the symbol of the loss, seems like a central concern, more so than the loss of the territory itself. The control seems to be the issue, since it is obvious that the land did not become empty of all its previous inhabitants at any given time; this is the first point. The second is, that the inhabitants have continued their existence elsewhere. The third, some people apparently did not feel an urge to “return” to the territory considered sacred and appropriated, in spite of vociferous propaganda. And the fourth, not everybody who, according to the Hebrew bible second temple period authors, should “return” did so, not everybody felt “in exile” out of the borders of the Hebrew god’s land, be the boundaries what they may; and diasporas of Israelites, Judahites, later Jews have continued to exist alongside an ideal center, an earthly and heavenly, metaphorical Jerusalem, until today.

There are various spaces where one can start looking at issues of territory, ideology, history and identity in the Hebrew bible.² One of them is the semantic field of “exile” and “diaspora.” Another is a contents analysis, looking at texts that cover, or uncover, ambiguity towards the “here” and the “there,” depending on the beholder’s stance or, to be more precise, apparent focalization. Yet another is to examine ideologies of sanctified and lay spaces, and their attributed locations.

The Hebrew Root גלל (G-L-H) and its Derivatives

The Hebrew verb formations of גלל (G-L-H) in the Qal, Hiph. And Hoph., once also

² In this article, as is her usual habit, the author does not capitalize the words *god* and *bible*, and the Hebrew God’s name is given as *Yhwh*. These forms represent the author’s view that the commonly accepted usages (*God, Bible, YHWH*) reflect a privileging of the words’ referents, which the author does not share. Capitalization in quoted materials within the article, or its lack, follows the original materials exactly as they are.

in the Niph., meaning ‘go away, be sent away, remove/d’, have different significations than the Piel. and some of the Qal formations denoting various instances of ‘uncover’.³ The distribution of the two signification groups vary as well: while גלה = ‘uncover’ is regular in the Torah and the historical Books, also in some prophetic Books where the second signification is lacking altogether or mostly, גלה = ‘move, remove, be moved’ begins appearing in the middle of 2 Kings and abounds in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah from chap. 40 onwards; it is also present in Ezra and Nehemiah (4 times), Amos, Lamentations, Esther, and once in 1 Sam (4.21). The total occurrences of this cluster of signification is about 70.

The noun גולה (*golah*) appears in the Hebrew bible 42 times, mostly—statistically speaking—in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but also with a big cluster in Ezra.⁴ The noun גלות (*galut*) is less frequent, 15 times, again mostly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel and with no occurrence in Ezra.⁵

What can an analysis of the distribution and occurrences show us, tentatively and assuming that there is no accident here? For instance, that in the bible both גולה (*golah*) and גלות (*galut*) are almost interchangeable, and that both would mean “exile” and “diaspora” in the same measure—that is, they may refer variously to the act of moving or removal from the land, or to the situation of “dispersion” from a land, or to a newly inhabited land, or to a land recognized somehow and opaquely as a

³ For our discussion it hardly matters whether etymologically or semantically the root should be recognized as one or more original sequences.

⁴ 2 Kgs 24.15–16; Jer 28.6; 29,1.4.16.20.31; 46,19; 48,7.11; 49,3; Ezek 1.1; 3.11.15; 11.24–25; 12.3–4.7.11; 25.3; Amos 1.15; Nah 3.10; Zech 6.10; 14,2; Esth 2.6; Ezra 1.11–2.1; 4.1; 6.19–21; 8.35; 9.4; 10,6–8.16; Neh 7,6; 1 Chron 5.22.

⁵ 2 Kgs 25.27; Isa 20.4; 45.13; Jer 24.5; 28.4; 29.22; 40.1; 52.31; Ezek 1.2; 33.21; 40.1; Amos 1.6, 9; Obad 1.20.

land of origin;⁶ and this last option will be articulated presently. A move towards using *golah* as signifying “diaspora”, in the sense of “place [outside]” or “community beyond”, is perhaps apparent in the Ezra-Nehemiah references to the “sons” or “community” of the *golah*.⁷ In short: the concepts of ‘exile’ as result or description of deportation, as a catastrophic outcome emanating from certain politico-historical events, are the invention of a locale and class—of certain elite groups in and round Jerusalem. The land did not become “desolate” with the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests; it did not wait to be ‘refilled’ after the advent of the Persian kings.⁸ “The sons of the *golah*” could not easily integrate, although their ideology insisted on their rightful and divine ownership of the land; the books of Ezra and Nehemiah bear ample evidence for this. The historical situation, much discussed in the last decades in biblical scholarship, is borne out by both linguistic data and ideological criticism.

Philip Davies writes:

‘Exile’ is not an episode in the ‘history of Israel’; it is an ideological claim on behalf of a certain population element in the province of Judah during the Persian period. ... This group has successfully achieved its claim. They produced literature that has been canonized in Christianity and Judaism and have thus gained a historical authority they do not deserve in the first place (Davies 1998: 135).

⁶ In fact, in postbiblical Hebrew *golah* almost disappears, outside quotations from biblical sources, in favor of *galut*—perhaps because of the influence of the Aramaic forms גלּוּת/גלוּ (galu/galuta), of the same meaning and usage as *golah*.

⁷ This meaning seems further developed in postbiblical Hebrew, as in the noun formation רוּשׁ הַגּוֹלָה (rosh ha-golah), while in Aramaic the idiom is רִישׁ גַּלּוּתָא (resh galuta’, both indicating ‘head of the diaspora’ in the Babylonian Jewish community).

⁸ For an analysis of identities in light of social circumstances in the Persian period see Yee 2003: 135-58.

While Davies's approach may seem extreme to some, and it does so to me, more and more scholars are convinced that the exile is perhaps not the mythically, universally traumatic experience that the bible's later books (Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles) made of it, together with the later experiences of the Roman conquest and the history of Judaism and Jews after they had emerged as such. This groping for a fresh awareness is hardly new, although until recently scholars have been quite happy to collaborate with the Good Book and understand "the exile" as a foundational experience of the post-586 BCE communities that produced it. What is new, or newer, is the tendency to re-examine other aspects and other biblical ideologies in the light of shifting 'exile' from the [historical, conceptual] centre to a more marginal if more realistic space, together with re-evaluations of what such a shift may imply.

Dialogic Ideologies: Exile/Exodus::Diaspora /Conquest

For, if we look already at the Torah, we find a dual insistence there. On the one hand, the beginnings of Hebrew people, as from Abra[ha]m onwards, is depicted as ensuing of a foreign origin, a foreign place, presumably a foreign religion.

The matrix is in fact complex, since the concept of exile is linked to that of the exodus on more than one level and in many versatile ways. The forefathers and mothers, as it seems, came from afar and at first insist on a preference for endogamic marriage, that is, on marrying women of their [foreign] source community—so from Abraham and Sarah to Jacob and his wives. At the same time, they try to gain a formal hold in the land of Canaan and marriages with foreign women are introduced for that end, accepted or rejected as the case may be—from Abraham himself to Judah and beyond. Nowhere is the dialogic relationship between a foreign and local identity as exemplified in matrimonial preferences stronger, perhaps, than in the story of

Dinah (Genesis 34), where Jacob seems to favor acceptance of exogamy, while his sons favor a separatist stance.

Practical reasons, drought and hunger, are introduced as motivation for departing from the promised and adopted land (Abraham, Jacob's sons). Practical and theological reasons serve to justify a "return" to this same land, according to the exodus myth, generations later. In Exodus through to and including Deuteronomy, also in Joshua and Judges, a multifaceted understanding of self-identity is in evidence. On the one hand, an ideology of divinely promised hence owned territory is overarching: if the land has to be acquired by force, so be it. On the other hand, a period of sojourn, of non-entering the land, of exile or diaspora, is formulated into a time span of forty years. There is a realistic knowledge of the land being owned, albeit "illegitimately", by others; of those others' kinship closeness to the "Hebrews" or "Israelites," there are many disclosures; of the danger and apparent actuality of the resultant admixture, ethnic and religious, between the groups, there is much ado; of certain groups inhabiting the Transjordan area, traditionally mostly outside the later Judah/Israel political territories, there is outspoken recognition, with an at least textual attempt of ethnic and geographical annexation by the two-and-a-half tribes (Reuben, Gad, half Manasseh). All layers of the Torah and beyond talk in two voices, so to speak: "we" come, and we go; the land belongs to "us", and also to "others"; we have to conquer it, but at times—and chiefly through exogamic marriage—we acquire it by other means. Foregrounding an ideology of scarcity, insistence upon just conquest and territory-bound identity is paramount (Schwartz 1997: 39-101); at the same time, a notion of foreignness and strangeness in the land persists.

Then comes the literature about a united kingdom, from the recorded beginnings with Saul to David and Solomon, and a divided kingdom into Israel and

Judah, North and South. Archaeological and historical issues aside (When was there, if ever, a dual-kingdom situation as described in the books of Kings?), the identity problem seems to be on its way to resolution. For the biblical writers at least, mostly from Judahite/Jerusalemite perspectives that have been transmitted through the extant biblical texts, there are two related identities, only one of them fully legitimate, and both are territory-bound, if somewhat short of being nationalistic in the post-Enlightenment sense of the term. If the identities are problematic, this is because of theological reasons. The eventual loss of land is experienced as, or attributed to, the break of the Yahwistic covenant. Thus, the emergence of monotheism is bound up with the loss of politico-territorial control. Identities out of this control are henceforth described either as exilic for deportees or else and paradoxically as foreign for those remaining on the land.

The paradox, and the dialogic description, continues. For in Ezra and Nehemiah the real foreigners, the newcomers, are again marked as the true inheritors of the land according to political edict (Cyrus's and his followers), divine promise and communal memory; and their existence outside the land is defined as "exilic" or "diasporic". The inhabitants of the land are described as illegitimate usurpers and ethnic foreigners. Strife against exogamic marriages, perhaps also for them if we count the book of Ruth as a polemic for exogamy at least in certain situations and for certain exceptional persons, is reminiscent of Genesis and beyond. Complaints against "exiles" who refuse to "return" are far from rare. The dualistic existence of the here and there, centre and periphery, and the problem faced by the initiators of the limited Judah/Benjamin centre round Jerusalem, cannot be easily resolved. Not much is known about the beginning of the so-called Second Temple, or Persian, period. Although historically, even during the heyday of the Hasmonean kingdom centuries

later, Jerusalem as space and community symbol has served as a centre for the emerging Judaisms, many more Judahites or Israelites or Jews lived and formed ongoing communities outside the holy Land. That such communities—first in Egypt and the rest of the Persian then Hellenistic domains, and in Mesopotamia, later with the advent of the Roman period also elsewhere—were defined, or defined themselves, as exiles, not only “diasporas” in relation to the Jerusalem community (the book of Esther is a good example of no-return intentions), is a matter choice, circumstances, and political ideology. In other words, interpreting loss of politico-territorial control as the loss the territory itself redefined all modes of communal existence within that territory and outside it.

Exile Denial?

The general picture drawn above is, I hope, as neutral as it is unoriginal. In presenting it, I did not wish to go as far as to deny that deportation did take place, since the empires of the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, and the Romans were known to have practiced such deportations. That certain community segments experienced the results of deportation as exile is beyond doubt: poems such as Psalm 137 evidence this forcefully. That “exile” became a dominant community memory and adhesive for later Judaisms is, once again, beyond doubt. That historical dimensions were inflated so that “exile” became an ideological construct, combining well with the theological reasons given for the loss of the Promised Land, cannot be contested. That Zionism has embraced the exile notion as a non-*desiratum* and *raison d’être* for instituting the state of Israel hardly needs pointing out. The issue is that of biblical interpretation as well as contemporary politics for Jews and Christians alike (Smith-Christofer 2002: 1-26). However, it seems to me that pointing out that “‘Exile’ is not an episode in the

‘history of Israel’” but just an a-historical claim of an interested party, as Davies claims, is hardly enough. Neither is the attempt to simply or complexly substitute “diaspora” for “exile”, as do Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, viewing “diaspora” as a more benevolent existential alternative to a “nationalistic” view of “exile”:

Diaspora can teach us that it is possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling land, a fortiori without controlling other people or developing a need to dispossess them of their lands... The renunciation of sovereignty (justified by discourses of autochthony...) and combined with a fierce tenacity in holding onto cultural identity, might well have something to offer... (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 723).⁹

Other Notions

Rather, let me subscribe, first, to Roland Boer’s notion, “Home Is Always Elsewhere” (Boer 2008: 81-106)¹⁰—but with a twist. Boer examines the dialogics—in his terms, “antipodean inversion”—between Garden and Curse as applied to views of Australia and England, in his contemporary culture. In Boer’s analysis, opposing tendencies of homeland and exile, triggered off *inter alia* by postcolonial, post-Edward Said assessments of the biblical Exodus myth as one account of several for identity and liberation, embody the complexities of Australian identity vis-à-vis a mythical homeland in both directions, that is, reinforcing a notion of foreign paradisiacal descent while, at the same time, a separatist existence. Translated into biblical

⁹ Quoted more fully in Smith-Christopher 2002 where—to be fair—Smith-Christopher asserts that Boyarin and Boyarin “offer a prophetic warning that is surely much more relevant to the 1650-year-long Christian nationalist project... than it is to the more recent Jewish experiment with nationalism” (p. 9).

¹⁰ The exact title of Boer’s Chapter 4, which is here referenced, is, “Home Is Always Elsewhere: Exodus, Exile, and the Howling Wilderness Waste.

literature, this contemporaneous situation, seemingly paradoxical, would tally with biblical tendencies of insistence that, at one and the same time, the Hebrews/Israelites and Judahites, later Jews, are both strangers to the land as well as its rightful owners. If so, home is always and concurrently Canaan and Jerusalem, Egypt and Canaan, always inside and somewhere outside, as a matter of relentless memory. Even if, from the literary transmission angle, anywhere and everywhere outside “Jerusalem” is mostly “exile”, and “Jerusalem” is both a real and symbolic home identity base, a space remains for other notions.

These notions are more after the “Third Space” thoughts advanced by Homi Bhabha in the wake of Jameson, Kristeva and others (Bhabha 1994=2004, especially 53-6, 314-19. This can be denied only with a deconstructive dramatic effort, when Israelites (at least of the male variety) confess that “my father was a wandering Aramean” (Deuteronomy 26:5, after the NRSV), which is quoted and elaborated in the Passover Haggadah, celebrating the exodus from Egypt. Within the Hebrew bible, the voice of the Father is an identity marker. The “son/s” of many texts—for instance those objecting to a permanent temple (2 Samuel 6 and 7), those ascribing an Egyptian spouse to King Solomon (1 Kings 3:1), those who prefer “foreign” women (Proverbs 1—9, Ezra and Nehemiah)—insist, from wherever spatiality and temporality they write, of which in many cases we know very little, that they are newcomers to the Land for which they lay a divinely inspired claim. Discounting for the duration what became an ascendant position, the transmitted dominance of Canaan or “Jerusalem” as a spatial centre, a communal identity marker which defines the periphery as “exile” or “diaspora”, and the usefulness of the “exile” concept for the continuance of historical Judaism, it must be admitted that the tension between a recollected memory of foreignness, coupled with a divinely yet nevertheless colonial

claim for a Land well known to be populated, is never absent from the Hebrew bible—at least, not for long. Paradoxical as it may seem, hybrid identity may and is claimed, in the bible as well as beyond it. That such a dual claim seems illogical does not diminish from its force as a vehicle for community adhesive, anywhere, any time. That a “Jerusalem”, earthly or heavenly, became a focus of monotheistic religions and a symbol of religio-territorial desire is a text-supported fact. That such a focus cannot exclude other modes of existence, other concurrent tendencies, is perhaps best admitted. Nobody would wish to minimize the experience of uprooting, deportation, loss of personal freedom and subsistence means. Nevertheless, a universalization of such a trauma can be politically useful for communal cohesion.

Useful for Whom?

Who was deported? In Kings, Lamentations, and Chronicles the voice of the urban elite, the previously highly privileged, seems to be heard. The privileged were deported. They are the ones who mourned, and suffered, and longed for a better past in the future. In other words, the “exile” as well as the “return” were, in a sense, products of a certain class or certain classes, and then claimed as a foundational and socially inclusive experience. Special status was also claimed for the “returnees” as against the indigenous population, seen as such even though it included natives as well as allochthonous¹¹ elements.

Throughout my reflections here I tried to show that the seemingly conflictual

¹¹ The terms used here, autochthonous and allochthonous, indicate origin (of persons and otherwise). They are derived from the Greek and signify approximately ‘indigenous’ and ‘originating from another place’, respectively. In the second half of the twentieth century the terms were imported into English from the Dutch, which uses *autochtoon* and *allochtoon* [the Dutch spelling] regularly in everyday speech in the senses of [ethnic] native/citizen and non [ethnic] citizen/immigrant, respectively.

claims for an autochthonous *and* allochthonous identity exist in the Hebrew bible concurrently, side by side. It would be tidy to sort those out and say: there was a past memory of foreign (and nomadic or semi-nomadic) origins, circumstantially supported by extra-biblical sources; then the situation changed (with the gradual passage into land cultivation and urbanism), and social identities became bound up with the Land, as exemplified by the myths of conquest and exile. Later texts point to a sedentary, land-bound autochthonous identity. Such a reading depends on the dating of most of the Torah, apart from later cycles of Priestly compositions and redactions, to the pre-Babylonian “exile” period; and the same applies to the rest of the early so-called historical Books (the Former Prophets) and several other prophetic Books. Once it is accepted that most of the Torah, and other biblical books once assigned by scholars to the First Temple period, are products of the exilic and post exilic periods, the chronological distinction between supposedly earlier allochthonous claims and later autochthonous claims collapses and blurs. Both claims seem to have been memorized at the same time in history. If so, both must have been useful for social cohesion. If so, both reflect, to a certain degree, some modus of reality. And if so, at the time of writing, they co-existed. That the autochthonous claim, regarding allochthonous existence—exile or diaspora—as peripheral, gained ascendancy is a matter of certain groups’ interests as well as contemporaneous and later theological needs: of writers, transmitters, and readers.

A Personal Note

Living in two countries is perhaps not your usual mode of existence. For me it was less a matter of choice than of necessity. Fifteen years ago, in Israel, when you were branded a feminist in biblical and Jewish studies you could not get a good university

position: you could not get tenure at all, unless your feminist interests were known to have evolved after you had made your name in mainstream work. So being offered a part-time position in feminist criticism in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, which quickly led to a chair in biblical studies at the University of Amsterdam, saved me as a professional and offered an opportunity which I never could have in Israel of the time. It entailed living mainly in The Netherlands; and although I kept my Israel home, and went back at least four times every year, and maintained my Israeli citizenship (if not residence status) in addition to acquiring a Dutch one, I considered myself an exile all this time: a cultural and economical exile, on the margin between necessity and choice, a stranger in the Netherlands and not a fully integrated member of Israeli society. As exiles go, I always joked, Amsterdam was a wonderful exile, full of opportunities.

And yet, now that I have gone back to teaching at Tel Aviv University, having almost fully retired from the Amsterdam workplace, I do feel how rootless I have become—even though I have done my utmost to nurture my roots. I fully understand why work migrants, emigrants, more than that refugees, “remember” their “homeland” to the tenth generation in the future and beyond, even when they seem to be fully integrated into their target community. A dual cultural identity, a dual social citizenship, seems to be necessary even when the “exile” will never be left again in favor of the source territory, for practical or other reasons.

It is this experience of duality, of loyalties to contradictory identities that nevertheless may coalesce on a personal and social level, that allows me to join scholars who criticize the centrality of the “exile” experience for biblical communities—to distinguish from its decisive centrality for biblical literature and theology, and for Judaism as a whole, and for the actual deportees themselves. It also

enables me to reflect on diasporic existence—especially for the social and intellectual elite—as neither ideal nor exilic in the negative sense; and on “exile” as a useful ideological code for transforming past claims for territory into future demands.

The Hebrew bible is political and is politicized in contemporary culture. This cuts more than one way.

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