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# Interpreting the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Beginning of Exile

## 1 Introduction: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Phenomena of Exile

“From the beginning to end, the Hebrew Bible may be considered as a series of narratives, tales, and depictions of deportation and displacement. ... the Bible is the great metanarrative of diaspora.”<sup>1</sup> The texts of the Hebrew Bible describing exile and diaspora form a “metanarrative” in the sense of a background narrative since, instead of a continuous historiographical account of exile, they contain several individual perspectives of this topic. The origin of many biblical texts is situated in a context of exile and migration, and they reflect the experience of displacement and wandering. The Babylonian Exile, especially, is a central myth and founding period in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas up to the 1980's scholars were interested primarily in historical, military, and political events during the exile and their influence on the religious institutions of Israel, present-day scholars apply an interdisciplinary approach in order to take into account sociological, anthropological, and psychological questions as well. The historical and literary research of central biblical texts such as 2 Kings 25, Jer 39 and 2 Chr 36:17–21 has been widened by the interpretation of prophetic and poetic texts like the books of Ezekiel and Lamentations which contain more indirect information regarding the beginning of exile. The social living conditions both in Judah and the exile have gained more attention in recent years. Trauma theory adds psychological perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

Aspects of diaspora studies may be applied to the interpretation of biblical texts. According to current scholarship, three general sociological criteria describe

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1 Gregory Lee Cuéllar, *Voices of Marginality: Exile and Return in Second Isaiah 40–55 and the Mexican Immigrant Experience* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2008), 1.

2 Some aspects of this article have been presented in: Marianne Grohmann, “Exil – ein Narrativ der Hebräischen Bibel in Europäischen Diskursen,” in *Europa mit oder ohne Religion? II: Der Beitrag der Religion zum gegenwärtigen und künftigen Europa*, ed. Kurt Appel and Isabella Guanzini (Göttingen: V&R unipress, Vienna University Press, 2015), 95–107.

3 Cf. Brad E. Kelle, “An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exile,” in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank R. Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 5–38.

diaspora: dispersion in space, homeland orientation and boundary maintenance.<sup>4</sup> The sociologist Rogers Brubaker hints at the ambivalence of boundary maintenance: “Although boundary-maintenance and the preservation of identity are ordinarily emphasized, a strong counter-current emphasizes hybridity, fluidity, creolization and syncretism.”<sup>5</sup> The term “diaspora” has its origin in the specific context of the scattering of the Jewish people in the Hellenistic period as the “spreading of people of Jewish origin over different countries outside Israel/Palestine.”<sup>6</sup> It implies their being related to a centre, either positively in the form of a desire to return or by delimitation. Compared to “exile” this is a somewhat more neutral term for Jewish life outside Israel,<sup>7</sup> and by now it has evolved beyond an exclusively Jewish context and is used for a wide variety of similar situations.

This article investigates historical and literary research of ancient texts and other sources from and about the period of the Babylonian Exile and links it with contemporary sociological and psychological debates about diaspora, displacement and migration. As a biblical example, I examine Lamentations 1: How does this text reflect the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of exile and diaspora? What can contemporary theories contribute to its interpretation? Some examples from Lamentations Rabbah add rabbinic perspectives.

## 2 The Babylonian Exile as a Key Period in the History of Biblical Israel

The Babylonian Exile is regarded as a key event in the history of Israel; it has influenced Jewish identity up to this day and is among the historical facts that are taken for granted by scholars of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>8</sup> Rainer Albertz, for example, has ad-

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4 Cf. Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (2005): 5–7; for a similar, but more detailed definition see Jürgen Van Oorschot, “Das babylonische Exil: Eine Konzeption im Alten Testament, in der Historiographie und in der Kulturbegegnung des 6. Jh. v. Chr.,” in *Kommunikation über Grenzen: Kongressband des XIII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie, 21.– 25. September 2008 in Wien*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verl.-Haus, 2009), 245.

5 Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘Diaspora’,” 6.

6 Jörn Kiefer, *Exil und Diaspora: Begrifflichkeit und Deutungen im antiken Judentum und in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Leipzig: Evang.-Verl.-Anst., 2005), 43.

7 Cf. Joseph Dan, “Exil, II. Judentum,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel, 4th ed., vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 1810.

8 Cf. van Oorschot, “Das babylonische Exil,” 233.

equately highlighted its relevance: “Of all the eras in Israel’s history, the exilic period represents the most profound caesura and the most radical change. Its significance for subsequent history can hardly be overstated.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast to its historic relevance the period of time of the Babylonian Exile is relatively short: just 60 years in the sixth century B.C.E.: from the deportation of Judeans by the Neo-Babylonians in several waves (598/7, 587/6, and 582) up to the end of Babylonian rule and the beginning of Persian era under Cyrus II in 539 B.C.E.<sup>10</sup>

Since the 1960’s it has gradually become generally accepted knowledge that the exile was the decisive formative phase of the literature of Biblical Israel and that approximately half of the books of the Hebrew Bible underwent their decisive formation processes during that period.<sup>11</sup> The entire literature of the Hebrew Bible – at least in European Bible scholarship – is divided into the categories pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic: at the same time this terminology is used to designate the periods of the history of Israel during the formation of the Hebrew Bible.

In any case, the Babylonian Exile has played a decisive part in shaping the identity of Israel: on the one hand, the loss of the country through exile constitutes a severe crisis of identity for biblical Israel, and on the other hand, a new conception of its own identity manifested in continuity with previous concepts of identity.<sup>12</sup> The experience of exile leads to a thorough renewal of religion and a major increase in the production of literature.<sup>13</sup> Central criteria of identity and symbols creating a sense of identity, such as monotheism, the Torah, the Sabbath, promises of blessings, circumcision, and teachings on purity reached their zenith of definition during the period of exile.<sup>14</sup>

The exile marked the beginning of the scattering of the people of Israel among the nations, an experience primarily marked by suffering, even up to

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**9** Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 1.

**10** Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Die Exilszeit: 6. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 11; Jürgen van Oorschot, “Das babylonische Exil,” 234.

**11** Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Die Exilszeit*, 7; Brad E. Kelle, “An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exil,” 5.

**12** Cf. Marianne Grohmann, “Diskontinuität und Kontinuität in alttestamentlichen Identitätskonzepten,” in *Religionsgemeinschaft und Identität: Prozesse jüdischer und christlicher Identitätsbildung im Rahmen der Antike*, ed. Markus Öhler (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2013), 17–42, 30–31.

**13** Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Die Exilszeit*, 11.

**14** Cf. Thomas Podella, “Reinheit II: Altes Testament,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Müller et al., vol. 28 (Berlin et al.: De Gruyter, 1997), 481–482.

this day. At the same time, the ensuing opening towards the nations paved the way for the subsequent emergence of Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

### 3 Availability of Historical Sources

Further investigation into this era shows that the available texts, socio-historical and archaeological source materials do not allow us to draw a clear picture. Our knowledge of the specific living conditions in Judah and Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E. is quite limited.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the dating of sources defies accurate delimitation. The Hebrew Bible preserves both descriptions of events in Jerusalem and a rich literary production from the time of the Babylonian Exile. The texts reflect an interaction of perspectives of the people in Jerusalem and those in exile. They were subject to comprehensive revision during the subsequent period of restoration under Persian rule, an aspect which has considerable influence on the narrative.<sup>17</sup>

#### 3.1 Archaeological Sources

Extra-biblical sources are rather scarce with respect to the sixth century B.C.E.<sup>18</sup> Archaeological research on Judah in the middle of the sixth century conveys the picture of a self-sufficient rural society with little new building activity. The settlement area covered the central parts of Judah, particularly north of Jerusalem, e. g. around Tell en-Naşbeh (Biblical Mizpah in Benjamin, approximately 12 km northwest of Jerusalem). There is no evidence of a clear break in the material culture but there is evidence of obvious decay and slow renewal amid altered

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rudolf Mosis, "Das Babylonische Exil Israels in der Sicht christlicher Exegese," in *Exil – Diaspora – Rückkehr: Zum theologischen Gespräch zwischen Juden und Christen*, ed. R. Mosis (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1978), 59–60.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Eric Meyers, "Exile and Restoration in Light of Recent Archaeology and Demographic Studies," in *Exile and Restoration Revisited: Essays on the Babylonian and Persian Periods in Memory of Peter R. Ackroyd*, ed. Gary N. Knoppers, Lester L. Grabbe, and Deidre N. Fulton (London, New York: Clark, 2009), 166–167.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Peter Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1968); Peter Ackroyd, *Israel under Babylon and Persia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); Brad E. Kelle, "An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exile," 7.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Rainer Kessler, *Sozialgeschichte des Alten Israel: Eine Einführung*. 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008), 131; Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 190.

circumstances.<sup>19</sup> According to current archaeological research, the inhabited area of Jerusalem and surroundings covered 1,000 dunams of land at the end of the Iron Age, however at the beginning of the Persian era it was only 110 dunams. During the period of the exile the population dropped from 25,000 to 2,750 people, a decline of 89 per cent.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the population drain in Benjamin was significantly lower with 56.5 per cent.<sup>21</sup> The archaeological findings show traces of destruction in major cities in Judah, e.g. Lachish, Ramat Rahel, Beth Shemesh during the last years of the Kingdom (597–581 B.C.E.), thus matching biblical accounts. Most of the texts in cuneiform script from this period were written in other places outside Judah.<sup>22</sup>

The portrayal of the major turning point and disaster scenario as we find it in the examples from Lam 1 and in other biblical descriptions of the exile (2 Kings 24–25; see also Jer 39; 51; 2 Chr 36:17–21) is only partially reflected by archaeological research. Archaeologists regard the sixth century B.C.E. as a period of transition from the Iron Age to the period of Persian rule.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2 Texts of the Hebrew Bible

There is no continuous historiographical account of the exile in the Hebrew Bible, but individual texts describe aspects of the experience of exile from different perspectives: The intention of the books of Ezekiel, Lamentations and Daniel is not to shed light on the historical background of the period of exile, but they indirectly contribute information in poetic and literary language. 2 Kings 25 (see also Jer 39; 51) describes the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. and the deserted land where only the poorest people remain.

2 Chr 36:21 describes the land lying desolate for a period of 70 years:<sup>24</sup> “for as long as she [the land] lay desolate she kept Sabbath (*šbt*) to fulfil threescore and ten [70] years.” Even though texts like this one describing the Sabbaths of the land convey the image of a desolate and depopulated land, this conception

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19 Cf. Kirsi Valkama, “What Do Archaeological Remains Reveal of the Settlements in Judah during the Mid-Sixth Century B.C.E.?,” in *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and its Historical Contexts*, ed. Ehud Ben Zvi, and Christoph Levin (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 58–59.

20 Cf. Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 262, 270; Eric Meyers, “Exile and Restoration in Light of Recent Archaeology and Demographic Studies,” 167.

21 Cf. Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 270, Table 4.3.

22 Cf. Brad E. Kelle, “An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exile,” 9–10.

23 Cf. *ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 8–9.

was regarded as a myth or fiction<sup>25</sup> as early as the 1950's as there is no archaeological evidence to support it. Thus, there is a general consensus nowadays that the image of the "desolate country" does not align with the reality of the sixth century B.C.E.; even during the period of exile, part of the Judean population remained in the land.<sup>26</sup>

The texts of the Hebrew Bible represent a wide variety of literary genres – tales, reports, prophetic interpretations of history, prayers, lamentations – which are not in chronological order. We have knowledge of certain events at the beginning and at the end of the exile, but we know very little about what happened in between. "Thus the period of the exile constitutes a wide open gap like a dark hole in the history of YHWH with his people with just a few spotlights shedding a little light on this period."<sup>27</sup>

The texts of the Hebrew Bible contain different conceptions of exile: exile as a lost opportunity of salvation (Jer 39–43), as a (temporary) end of history (2 Kings 24–25) and as a Sabbath of the land (2 Chr 36:21).<sup>28</sup> The Hebrew Bible uses a varied terminology to designate the phenomena of migration, flight, displacement, deportation, and exile.<sup>29</sup> There are texts in which exile is cast in a negative light, whereas other texts regard exile as a "chance for survival, point zero and new start."<sup>30</sup> Narrative texts like the book of Daniel and later works including some deuterocanonical books (3 Esdras, Tobit, Judith) fill gaps of information on the exile with their own tales.<sup>31</sup> The book of Esther is an example of Jewish life in the diaspora with a willingness to accept assimilation.<sup>32</sup>

At this point, I would like to examine a specific text more closely as an example, namely Lam 1.

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25 Cf. Antje Labahn, "Trauern als Bewältigung der Vergangenheit zur Gestaltung der Zukunft: Bemerkungen zur anthropologischen Theologie der Klagelieder," *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 515.

26 Cf. Eric Meyers, "Exile and Restoration in Light of Recent Archaeology and Demographic Studies," 169.

27 Rainer Albertz, *Die Exilszeit*, 13.

28 Cf. *Ibid.*, 13–22.

29 Cf. Jörn Kiefer, *Exil und Diaspora*, 226–227; Jürgen van Oorschot, "Das babylonische Exil," 236.

30 Cf. Jörn Kiefer, *Exil und Diaspora*, 692.

31 Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Die Exilszeit*, 23–40.

32 Cf. Shemaryahu Talmon, "'Exil' und 'Rückkehr' in der Ideenwelt des Alten Testaments," in *Exil – Diaspora – Rückkehr: Zum theologischen Gespräch zwischen Juden und Christen*, ed. Rudolf Mosis (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verl., 1978): 31–54, 47–48.

## 4 Interpreting Lamentations 1: Exegetical, Sociological and Psychological Perspectives

### 4.1 Introduction

Lam 1 refers directly to the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of part of its inhabitants into exile in 587 B.C.E. The song is an anonymous text, a literary artefact, an acrostic in 22 strophes. The situation in the city is described from the perspective of people who have remained in Jerusalem, but time and again turn their eyes to those who have been deported. Many commentators argue that this text was written immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem, because it describes the happenings in a shocking way.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, this can be the effect of conscious literary and stylistic decisions from a later era. As there is no indication of a return to Jerusalem, the period of composition of Lam 1 might be limited to the years 580–550 B.C.E.<sup>34</sup> The laments might have been used in public mourning, either in Jerusalem at the site of the destroyed temple (cf. Jer 41:5) or in the rural areas around Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup> The language of trauma and shock, revealing profound emotional connection to Jerusalem, and the lack of any hope or return argue for the exilic origin of the text. That the text is a highly sophisticated acrostic might argue for the same, that it was not created immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem but rather in exile. Lam 1 is written from the perspective of people who stayed in the destroyed city, but switches to the angle of the exiles from time to time.

First I will investigate the formal shaping and the genre of Lam 1:

In the first part of the song, v. 1–11, an external voice describes the situation in Jerusalem. The city is personified in different social roles, as lonely widow, former princess, now a slave, a mother bereaved of her children, a lamenting, mourning woman, a woman whose lovers and friends have abandoned her.<sup>36</sup> Adele Berlin tries to “translate” these metaphors: “The woman betrayed by her lovers is the country betrayed by its allies; the mother mourning the loss of

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Ulrich Berges, *Klagelieder*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2002), 72.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Klaus Koenen, *Klagelieder (Threni)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2014), 30.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Christl M. Maier, “Lost space and revived memory. From Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. to New Orleans in 2009,” in *Interpreting Exile* (wie Anm. 3), 191.

<sup>36</sup> See Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 47: “Here a kaleidoscope of images turns quickly from a lonely widow, to a degraded princess, to a whore, to a rape victim, to a betrayed lover, to an abandoned wife.”

her children is the city lamenting the exile of her citizens; the sexual violation of the woman-city is the religious violation of the temple precincts; the sexual sin of immorality is the religious sin of idolatry.”<sup>37</sup> The first part of Lam 1 features the external voice of a narrator; we find in v. 9c and 11c the voice of Jerusalem herself inserted twice along with an appeal to God.

In the second part, v. 12–22, we discern the voice of Jerusalem herself, a lamentation of the city. In this speech about her in third person singular in v. 1–18a, we find two insertions the other way round: Jerusalem herself speaks in first person singular and addresses in v. 12 כָּל-עֹבְרֵי דֶרֶךְ (“all, who pass by on the way”) and in v. 18 כָּל-<sup>(עַמִּים)</sup> [הָעַמִּים] (“all nations”). In v. 20–22 the song of Jerusalem finds its climax in a prayer, an appeal to God, introduced by: רֵאֵה יְהוָה (“See, YHWH”).

Lam 1 uses at least three different literary patterns and combines them into a unique creation:

(1) a city lament: the mourning about the downfall of a city – a literary genre that is well-known in the ancient Near East from the nineteenth century B.C.E., e.g. mourning about the downfall of Ur, (2) a dirge/keening: a lament for the dead (Lam 1:11c–16.18–22)<sup>38</sup> and (3) elements of the Psalms in the lament of a single person or of the whole people.

The personification of the city renders the destruction of Jerusalem more dramatic and personal. The titles רבה and שרה for Jerusalem are titles that are ascribed to goddesses in the ancient Near East.<sup>39</sup> City goddesses mourning about the loss of their cities, the temple and the people, are well known in Mesopotamia.<sup>40</sup> Aside from these personifications of the whole city, many groups of inhabitants of Jerusalem are mentioned in Lam 1: כהנים (“priests”) in v. 4.19, בתולות (“young women”) in v. 4.18, עוללים (“babies”) in v. 5, שרים (“princes”) in v. 6, בחורים (“young men”) in v. 15.18, בנים (“children/sons”) in v. 16 and זקנים (“the elderly”) in v. 19.

The female personification of Jerusalem embodies a human collective and a space at the same time, that is, the inhabitants as well as the gates, buildings, and streets of the city. The name Zion traditionally stands for God’s elected place, the mountain on which the main sanctuary is located. The title *Daughter Zion* creates a relationship between the space, its population, and God.<sup>41</sup>

The following interpretation of Lam 1 applies some of the sociological and psychological approaches to the biblical text and its rabbinic interpretation.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Hedwig Jahnow, *Das hebräische Leichenlied im Rahmen der Völkerdichtung* (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1923), 174.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Ulrich Berges, *Klagelieder*, 54–55.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>41</sup> Maier, “Lost Space and revived memory,” 192.



## 4.2 Dispersion in Space

גְּלוּתָהּ יְהוּדָה מֵעַי וּמְרַב עֲבָדָה  
הִיא וְשָׁבָה בְּגוֹיִם לֹא מְצָאָה מְנוּחַ  
כָּל-רֹדְפֶיהָ הַשִּׁיגוּהָ בֵּין הַמְּצָרִים

Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude;  
she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place;  
her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. (Lam 1:3) (NRS)

“Judah has gone into exile” – this is described in a verbal form of the root גלה (*glh*) from which *gōlāh* is derived. Going into exile is described as an active process although it never describes a voluntary departure. Judah, personified as a woman, is seen both as a state and as a population. “She lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place” is another description of the circumstances of exile. The root גלה (*glh*) has a broad spectrum of meanings – to denude, to open, to go away, to emigrate, to be deported, to go into exile<sup>42</sup> –, and the noun *gōlāh* designates the *group* of deported, exiled, or banished persons, the community in exile collectively, and the *process* of deportation, banishing, removal, or leading into exile<sup>43</sup> as well as subsequently also the *place* or *condition* of exile.<sup>44</sup> The situation of those in exile is described as suffering (עני) and distress (מצרים), indicating the difficult social living conditions.

## 4.3 Social Living Conditions after the Destruction of Jerusalem

One of the social effects of exile is the diminishment of resources and security.<sup>45</sup> The situation of those who remained in Jerusalem after the destruction of the city in 587 B.C.E. is described as follows:

כָּל-עֲמֻמָּה נְאֻנְחִים מִבְּקָשִׁים לָהֶם  
נָחְנוּ מִחַמּוּדֵיהֶם  
בְּאֶרֶץ לְהָשִׁיב וּפֶשׁ

<sup>42</sup> Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, vol. 1, 18th ed. (Berlin et al.: Springer, 2007), 215–216.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Richard Ames, “The Cascading Effects of Exile: From Diminished Resources to New Identities,” in *Interpreting Exile* (wie Anm 3), 175–176.

All her people groan as they search for bread;  
 they trade their treasures  
 for food to revive their strength. (Lam 1:11) (NRS)

These descriptions of dire need, hunger and problems with food supply are in contradiction with texts such as Jer 39–40, which are intended to convey hope for a new beginning. One explanation may be that immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem, supplies in the city was obviously scarcer than in rural areas and during subsequent periods.<sup>46</sup>

In Lam 1:16–20, the children and very young people are described as being affected in particular by captivity, violence, and death – also a general experience in situations of exile. However, a list of all population groups mentioned in the book of Lamentations shows that it was not only the weakest that suffered. It reveals a diverse picture of the urban population including some or even all strata and groups of society.<sup>47</sup> This image differs from 2 Kings 24–25 and Jer 39, where we are told that only the socially weak groups stayed in the country: They could reflect the perspective of the exiled in Babylon who understood themselves as elite looking down on the people that stayed in the land. The text describes the state of emergency after the destruction of Jerusalem and the sending of its inhabitants to exile: exile (v. 3), misery and wandering (v. 7), hunger (v. 11), murder, especially of the youngest (v. 20), slavery, captivity (v. 5.18). Corresponding to the original profane character of the lament for the dead, the suffering in the city is described as a very secular experience, caused to a large extent by humans to other humans.

Other social effects of exile are destructive behavioural patterns in crisis: The state disintegrates, violence becomes the order of the day, and the weak are further subjugated. Conflicts begun at home are continued. A widespread phenomenon is the ambiguous view of foreign rulers:<sup>48</sup> The “pursuers” and “affliction” are not mentioned by name but described using a varied linguistic repertory of oppression, limitation and persecution.<sup>49</sup> Lam 1 uses various terms for the enemies: אִיבִים (v. 2.5.9.16.21), רֹדְפִים (v. 3.6), צָרִים (v. 5.7.10.17). What is particularly terrifying is that former friends have become enemies (Lam 1:8). The fact that the

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Kessler, *Sozialgeschichte des Alten Israel*, 131; Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 190.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Berlin, *Lamentations*, 13–15.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts,” in *Interpreting Exile* (wie Anm. 3), 266–267.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Koenen, *Klagelieder*, 41–45.

Babylonians are not mentioned by name makes the text open to different readings at various times.

Although Lam 1 uses poetic language to mourn the destruction of Jerusalem in the style of lamentations of the destruction of cities,<sup>50</sup> as it is common in the ancient Near East, the text contains clues that indicate specific circumstances: Judah has gone into exile (v. 3), the city, her streets and gates are desolate and deserted, no solemn assemblies are held (v. 4), enemies are in power (v. 5.7), the own princes are weak (v. 6), the people go hungry (v. 11.19):

בגפּל עמָהּ בְּיַד־צָר וְאִין עֹזֵר לָהּ  
רְאוּהָ צָרִים שְׂחָקוּ עַל מִשְׁבֹּתָהּ:

When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was no one to help her, the foe looked on mocking over her downfall. (Lam 1:7b) (NRS)

Passages like this one with the “downfall”, “end” or “sabbath” (שבת), as well as the aforementioned 2 Chr 36:21 have given rise to the image of total destruction of Jerusalem and a deserted land. “Exile is Jerusalem as a wasteland; it is the emptiness of the soul; it is to be without God.”<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, Lam 1 describes the city in great detail from the perspective of a person inside it. Thus, there is a connection between groups of the population in exile and people who remain in the city – a perspective of homeland orientation. “Afflictions” (v. 7) and “great servitude” or “hard labour” (v. 3) describe the circumstances of life. עני is a general expression designating affliction of whatever kind: sorrow, suffering, humiliation, and oppression. It is frequently used in the Psalms (e.g. Ps 9:14), in wisdom literature (e.g. Job 10:15) but also appears in narrative texts (Gen 16:11), and is sometimes used in describing the relationship with God: God sees the affliction of the Israelites in Egypt; God cares for Israel and delivers it from misery (Exod 3:7.17).

#### 4.4 The Trauma: From “Speechless Terror” to Collective Memory

According to trauma studies terror renders those who experience it speechless in the beginning:

<sup>50</sup> Albertz, *Die Exilszeit*, 127.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (London: Basic Books, 1999), 222.

The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge. ... Not having been fully interpreted as it occurred, the event cannot become ... a narrative recovery that is integrated into a completed story of the past.<sup>52</sup>

If this is correct, the literary style and poetic language of Lam 1 could indicate that it had not been written down immediately after the catastrophe, but later on during the process of coping with the catastrophe.

Christl Maier uses Jan Assmann's concept of "collective memory" to describe what is going on in Lam 1: "the collective memory of a group or society is the sum of ideas and knowledge gathered to establish its identity."<sup>53</sup> The destruction of Jerusalem 587 B.C.E. greatly influenced the collective memory of the city's population.

By personifying Jerusalem as female, the book generates a close relationship between the city and its population.<sup>54</sup> The personification of the city in the female figure of daughter Zion in Lam 1 shaped Israel's collective memory in two ways: (1) Personified Zion attests to a broken relationship between the city, its population, and God. (2) It sustains the readers' emotional connection to the space. The female figure generates hope for the survivors of the catastrophe in Judah and in exile and expectations of rebuilding the city.<sup>55</sup>

"Verbalizing pain and telling one's story of suffering often has a cathartic and healing effect"<sup>56</sup> – they are an attempt at self-consolation. We find this process of collective memory, the starting point of remembering and mourning, in Lam 1:7a:

יָזְכְּרָה יְרוּשָׁלַם יְמֵי עֲנָיָהּ וּמְרוֹדֶיהָ  
כָּל מַחֲמָדֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ מִיַּמֵּי קִדְּמָהּ

Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering,  
all the precious things that were hers in days of old. (NRS)

According to refugee studies, living in a memorialized past is a specific quality of the post-traumatic experience. Establishing identity in the present ("who I am")

<sup>52</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Introduction: Recapturing the Past," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 153.

<sup>53</sup> Maier, "Lost Space and revived memory," 189.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 192.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

is based on identities from the past (“who I was”).<sup>57</sup> We notice examples of this memorialized past in Lam 1:

In v. 1 we find this juxtaposition between the past and the present identity: from a nation full of people (רבותי עם/בגוים) to a lonely one (אלמנה/בודד), from a princess among the provinces (שרתי במדינות) to a tributary (מס). V. 6 contrasts the former glory (הדר) with the present situation of weakness (בלא כוח).

## 5 Religious Dimensions of Exile/*gôlāh*

A major subject of debate among scholars engaging in exile and diaspora studies is whether exile should be regarded as a religious<sup>58</sup> or secular phenomenon. The fact that exile is generally man-made (as opposed to a result of, for example, natural disaster) and that it is a political and “secular” phenomenon<sup>59</sup> also holds true for the Babylonian Exile. Nevertheless, drawing a boundary between religion and the secular in this case is an anachronism: In antiquity, religion is never separate from the other spheres of life. In the Hebrew Bible, the transcendental dimension is always present. As regards antiquity, it may be more appropriate to speak about aspects of the secular and religious that, while differentiated, cannot be separated from each other:

any and all theological reflection on the exilic experience ... must first contend with the enormity of the physical, social, and psychological trauma of this experience in the life of Ancient Israel, and only then proceed to an assessment of theological themes that are part of the recovery process of a frankly heroic survival of domination in the ancient Near East.<sup>60</sup>

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57 Cf. David M. Carr, “Reading into the Gap: Refractions of Trauma in Israelite Prophecy,” in *Interpreting Exile* (wie Anm. 3), 297–299.

58 van Oorschot, “Das babylonische Exil,” 250, argues that “exile” is never a merely historical and descriptive concept but always a “political, social and religious concept creating a sense of identity.”

59 See Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: MIT Press, 1990), 358: “It is not true that the views of exile in literature and, moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography.”

60 Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Reassessing the Historical and Sociological Impact of the Babylonian Exile (597/587–539 B.C.E.),” in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (Leiden et al.: Brill, 1997), 36.

The book of Lamentations is an example of the intertwining of “secular” and religious-theological elements: It describes the events around the *gōlāh* in very secular, almost “historical” terms. Following the example of the ritualized lamentation for the dead, the book of Lamentations in a figurative sense mourns the death of the city of Jerusalem. At the same time the city, personified as a woman, mourns the death of her children. As early as 1923, the Jewish Old Testament expert Hedwig Jahnow observed that lamentation for the dead is a secular genre in the ancient Near East since as a matter of principle death is a sphere distant from God.<sup>61</sup> In accordance with the secular character of the lamentation for the dead, the social distress in the city is largely described in exclusively secular and sober terms as being caused by humans: deportation, misery, serfdom, hunger, the threat of enemies, and murder. The situation reflects the state of emergency immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem.

The catastrophe takes on an even more harrowing dimension when God is described as its cause (v. 5.12–13). Holding deities responsible for the destruction of cities is not uncommon in the context of the ancient Near East: Sometimes the tutelary goddess of a city cannot protect it, because other, higher gods decided to destroy it.

The religious dimension comes to the fore when God is described as initiator of the disaster scenario (v. 5) and the experience of exile is shown in the context of a process of wrestling with God. The personification of the city of God has its predecessor in the Mesopotamian lamentations of the destruction of cities in which the tutelary deity of a city mourns the loss of his/her city, temple and population.<sup>62</sup> Thus, e.g. in the second lamentation of the destruction of the city of Ur<sup>63</sup> shared responsibility is attributed to several deities. The city deities are not capable of protecting their city because higher-ranking deities have decided that it should be destroyed. In the Hebrew Bible, YHWH assumes both the protective and destructive functions. Following the example of ancient Near Eastern lamentations of the destruction of cities, God is held responsible for the destruction of the city. Unlike the ancient oriental parallels, Lam 1 regards the transgressions, offences and crimes of men as the reason why God has taken the side of the enemy: “because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions” (Lam 1:5).

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61 Cf. Jahnow, *Das hebräische Leichenlied*, 168 ff.

62 Cf. Berges, *Klagelieder*, 63.

63 Cf. Otto Kaiser and Bernd Janowski, eds., *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, vol. 2, *Orakel, Rituale, Bau- und Votivinschriften, Lieder und Gebete* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verl.-Haus Mohn, 1986), 707.

Human misconduct and violations of the relationships within the community are contrasted with the conviction that God is righteous:

צָדִיק הוּא יְהוָה כִּי פִיהוּ מִרִיתִי

The Lord is in the right,  
for I have rebelled against his word (Lam 1:18) (NRS)

The insight that God is righteous gives rise to the hope of being accepted again by him. It is true that, in the same way as in the Psalms of lamentation, God is held responsible for the situation of distress but at the same time the lamentation is directed to him with a prayer for help.<sup>64</sup> The texts express a wrestling between human responsibility vis a vis divine intervention.

רָאָה יְהוָה כִּי־צָר־לִי  
מֵעַי חִמְקָרוּ  
נִהַפְּדָ לִבִּי בְמִקְרָבִי  
כִּי מָרוּ מִרִיתִי

See, O Lord, how distressed I am;  
my stomach churns,  
my heart is wrung within me,  
because I have been very rebellious. (Lam 1:20) (NRS)

The text oscillates between two poles: recognizing God as the originator of one's own distress, itself a logical consequence of his righteousness in the face of the people's sinfulness, and continuing to trust in God as the only one who can deliver them from distress. This tension is a defining characteristic of the Psalms. However, Lam 1 basically lacks any prospect of comfort. In the end "many sighs" are all that is left for the city that was once inhabited by people from many nations:

כִּי־רַבּוֹת אֲנַחְתִּי וְלִבִּי דָוָי:

For my groans are many  
and my heart is faint. (Lam 1:22) (NRS)

Even though the text offers little comfort, speaking about distress may be a first step: "Jerusalem remembers" (v. 7) – the key word זָכַר is used frequently in this

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Klaus Koenen, Art. "Klagelieder Jeremias," in *Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet (WiBiLex)*, <http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/23640/>.

context. It describes at least the beginning of a process of remembering and lamenting in order to cope with the disaster.

In one point there is a difference in Lam 1 to these ancient Near Eastern parallels: The text holds the sins of the people responsible for God's activity. Human responsibility is one reason for the present desolation. חטא (v. 8), פשע (v. 14.22) and רעה (v. 21.22) hint at every human behaviour that separates man from God, misbehaviour towards other people, sin. Different voices reflect on the reasons for the disaster.

As in Psalms of lament, God is held responsible for the suffering, but is at the same time beseeched for help. We find the same kind of interaction: God as cause of suffering – insight into God's justice – human responsibility – adherence to God who alone can rescue one from suffering – characteristic of the Psalms, but in Lam 1 the comforting perspective is almost completely absent. Although the text does not give any comfort, at least speaking aloud can be a first step to overcome the catastrophe: "With this peculiar form of poetry, the authors obviously tried to overcome the wordless grief ..." <sup>65</sup>

## 6 *Ekha Rabbah* (LamR): Rabbinic Perspectives on Lamentations 1

*Lamentations/Ekha Rabbah* (or *Echa Rabbati*) is an exegetical Midrash on the book of Lamentations, dating probably from the first half of the fifth century C.E. <sup>66</sup> A group of *petichot* is followed by a commentary interpreting all 5 chapters of the book אֵיכָה. It is unknown whether they were written as sermons in the synagogue or constructed as literary texts from the beginning. <sup>67</sup> The Midrash combines the destruction of the First and Second Temple with other dramatic events like the Bar Kochba revolt. <sup>68</sup>

The interpretation of Lam 1:3 in LamR 1:20 distinguishes between exile/*gôlāh* of Israel and the exile of the nations:

<sup>65</sup> Maier, "Lost Space and revived memory," 191.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1996), 285.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Marianne Grohmann, "Jüdische Psalmenexegese als Paradigma kanonischer Intertextualität," in *Der Bibelkanon in der Bibelauslegung: Beispielexegesen und Methodenreflexionen*, ed. Egbert Ballhorn and Georg Steins (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 62–73.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Günter Stemberger, "Reaktionen auf die Tempelzerstörung in der rabbinischen Literatur," in *Zerstörungen des Jerusalemer Tempels: Geschehen – Wahrnehmung – Bewältigung*, ed. Johannes Hahn (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 217.



1. A. 'Judah has gone into exile:'
- B. Do not the nations of the world go into exile?
- C. Even though they go into exile, their exile is not really an exile at all [אומות העולם אינן גולים].
- D. But for Israel, their exile really is an exile [ואבל ישראל גלותם גלות].
- E. The nations of the world, who eat the bread and drink the wine of others, do not really experience exile.
- F. But the Israelites, who do not eat the bread and drink the wine of others, really do experience exile.
- G. The nations of the world, who ... travel in litters, do not really experience exile.
- H. But the Israelites, who [in poverty] go barefoot – their exile really is an exile.
- I. That is why it is said, 'Judah has gone into exile.'<sup>69</sup>

The verb גלה is used as an active verb as in the biblical text, both for Israel and the nations. Only Israel's exile is defined as "real" exile, repeated three times with the tautological sentence: גלותם גלות. The intention of this interpretation is boundary maintenance in exile/*gôlâh*. The text does not mention a special historic period, but refers to any situation of *gôlâh*.

LamR to Lam 1:11 links this verse with Jer 52:6, describing heavy famine:

1. A. 'All her people groan as they search for bread:'
- B. 'In the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was heavy on the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land' (Jer 52:6).
- C. For the people of the land there was no bread, but the disciples of sages had bread (לעם הארץ לא היה לחם, היה לתלמידי חכמים).
- D. That was in the destruction of the first temple (הדא בחרבן ראשון).
- E. But as to the destruction of the second, 'All her people groan as they search for bread.'<sup>70</sup>

This text tries to resolve the contradiction in the biblical text between Jer 52:6 and Lam 1:11: While Lam 1:11 talks about כל עמה ("all her people") suffering from hunger, Jer 52:6 describes the famine concerning only עם הארץ ("the people of the land"). According to the rabbinic principle that there may not be any contradiction in the biblical text,<sup>71</sup> the rabbis distinguish here between different social groups and between the destruction of the First and Second Temple: The suf-

<sup>69</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Lamentations Rabbah: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 136; EkhR 1:210, Salomon Buber, ed., *Midrasch Echa Rabbati* (Wilna: Romm, 1899; Hildesheim: Olms, 1967), 62.

<sup>70</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Lamentations Rabba*, 159; EkhR 1:336–337; ed. Buber, 74–75.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Günter Stemberger, "Hermeneutik der Jüdischen Bibel," in *Hermeneutik der Jüdischen Bibel und des Alten Testaments*, ed. Stemberger and Christoph Dohmen (Stuttgart et al.: Kohlhammer, 1996), 80.

fering of עַם הָאָרֶץ (Jer 52:6) – in opposition to לתלמידי חכמים, the rabbinic scholars<sup>72</sup> – applies to the aftermath of the destruction of the First Temple, while the more comprehensive famine of all people (Lam 1:11) applies to the suffering after the destruction of the Second Temple.

In the rabbinic explanation in LamR to Lam 1:5, at the transition to Lam 1:6, we find an aspect that can be interpreted as comfort in the situation of exile:

1. A. ‘her children have gone away, captives before the foe:’
- B. Said R. Judah, “Come and notice how much the Holy One, blessed be He, loves children.
- C. “The ten tribes went into exile [גליל], but the Presence of God [שכינה] did not go into exile. D. “Judah and Benjamin went into exile, but the Presence of God did not go into exile.
- E. “The sanhedrin went into exile, but the Presence of God did not go into exile.
- F. “The priestly watches went into exile, but the Presence of God did not go into exile.
- G. “But when the children went into exile, then the Presence of God went into exile: ‘her children have gone away, captives before the foe.’<sup>73</sup>

The idea that the שכינה, the presence of God, is with the children in exile, might include a tiny aspect of comfort.

These few rabbinic examples reflect their context in the Hellenistic and Roman Diaspora and link this context with that of the Babylonian Exile.

Today it is not possible to speak about *gōlāh* in a neutral way. The distinction between *gōlāh* and *diaspora* / תפוצה marks the different connotations of dispersion in space:

In Modern Hebrew the term *tefuza* (literally: “scattering”) has been coined to designate diaspora as opposed to *galūt*, the latter being associated with suffering, persecution, and despair. Diaspora, in contrast, describes a place where Jews can lead a fruitful life in a pleasant and protected environment and need not attempt to leave the country and immigrate to the land of Israel.<sup>74</sup>

The Babylonian Exile is only the beginning of many different developments of *gōlāh* and *diaspora*.<sup>75</sup> Altogether, applying interdisciplinary approaches to texts about the Babylonian Exile proves useful. As the contexts of these approaches are different from those of the ancient texts, this application opens a wide spectrum of new questions.

72 Cf. Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, “Talmid Hakham,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 15:746.

73 Jacob Neusner, *Lamentations Rabba*, 145; Salomon Buber, *Midrasch Echa Rabbati*, 69.

74 Joseph Dan, “Diaspora, II. Jüdische Diaspora,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel, 4th ed., vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 829.

75 Cf. Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, “Galut,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 7:275–294.