

What was life like for Jews in *galut Bavel* and Persia?

The Israelites of the Northern Kingdom were exiled in 720 BCE, when their country was conquered by the Assyrians. Despite some attempts to bring them back, the “Ten Tribes” disappeared, as a people, from history. The Judeans, on the other hand, were exiled 135 years later and managed to preserve their ethnic, cultural, and religious identities to such an extent that tens of thousands moved to Jerusalem and Judah when they were allowed to. How?

There are a number of different factors which contributed to this surprising reality.

a. The Babylonian philosophy of exile

The Assyrians, who conquered Samaria in 722-720 and exiled the Northern Kingdom of Israel, had a sophisticated philosophy of exile: their goal was to obliterate all semblances of national or regional identities, so as to eliminate the possibility of revolts by vanquished peoples. In order to accomplish this, they did not rest with just relocating the conquered populations: they divided the people and scattered them across the empire, and later imported exiles from various other places into the conquered territory. Ezra 4:9 has, according to one reading, a long list of the peoples brought by Aššurbanipal into the province of Samaria.

The Babylonians, however, wanted to make use of the economic potential of the people they conquered, and so brought them towards Babylon. In order to do this, they kept communities together, bring them en bloc to new locations with no effort to encourage assimilation or integration. They also did nothing to repopulate the lands emptied.

b. Geographical settlement

The destination was the vicinity of Nippur, a major city in Babylonia which had been loyal to Assyria – and therefore sacked and left in ruins when the Babylonians asserted their independence over Assyria.

Exiles then (as now) tended to name their new settlements after their old homes. In the area around Nippur we find towns called *Bīt Šurayya* (Phoenicians from צר = Tyre), *Bīt Hamataya* (חמת) and Neirab (Arameans), *Išqalunu* and *Ḥazatu* (Philistines from Ashkelon and Gaza), *Nāru ša Miširaya* (Egyptians), and *URU ša Arbaya* and ^{𐤀𐤓𐤕}*Qidari* (Arabs). The *Kabāru* canal ran through the city of Nippur, and Ezekiel mentions (3:15) that he came to the גולה “exile community” which lived in Tel Abib, next to the Kebar Canal.

c. Political organization

To retain a sense of national identity, a exiled community must have some type of centralizing leadership, whether hereditary or charismatic, and whether officially recognized or not, to offer guidance and, perhaps more importantly, to offer focus. The Jewish community in Babylonia had different types of leadership to fulfill this role.

House of David

We already mentioned that Jehoiachin was supported by the Babylonian court, and so among the Jews it is certainly true that leadership was still identified with the Davidic dynasty. Recall that the

early leaders of the Restoration were also Davidides, indicating that they had never lost their claim to be the political leaders.

Priests

Although the Temple was destroyed, the Priests retained their influence even while in exile. The evidence for this comes, again, primarily from the aftermath of this period: in the Restoration movement, priests played a prominent role.

Zēqēnīm

Finally, a group that appears prominently in the book of Ezekiel (as זקני יהודה or זקני ישראל), and is also the first addressee (זקני הגולה) on Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29. The fact that the group appears immediately in the exilic scene as leaders indicates that they were not a new entity, but had been in a similar position back in Judah, but it seems clear that their relative status rose with the loss of the Temple and the monarchy. They continued to act as the leaders after returning to Judah: the שבי יהודיא are mentioned numerous times in Ezra 5 and 6.

d. Religious practices

In many exilic communities, and especially in the Jewish exilic community of Babylonia, religion played a central and indispensable role in preserving the community's sense of identity. Religion in this case actually played a double role. On the one hand, there are religious practices they inherited from pre-exilic life that became more significant in exile. On the other hand, religion provides a context within which to innovate new practices which mark their new identity.

For now it may suffice to single out the observance of *shabbat* and *kashrut* as inherited practices which in exile would provide powerful reminders and markers of identity. There were also some new, or newly emphasized, practices and ideologies.

Four annual fasts

Zechariah 8:18-19 mentions the "four fasts" – the fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month – which commemorated events connected with the destruction of the Temple. When observed in exile, these would have been powerful marks of identity and distinctiveness.

e. Names

It is clear that the adoption of local names does not indicate anything about assimilation, as the evidence from the names Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Mordechai, and Esther demonstrate. We may conjecture, however, that those who chose to retain traditional names for their children did so as an act of self-identification.

f. Genealogical lists

One of the simpler but more powerful tools of identity-retainment among the exiles was the keeping of genealogical lists. Their existence is seen again in the Restoration, where beyond the many detailed names and families mentioned, it is also indicated that the people were returning "each to his own town" (Ezra 2:1; Neh 7:6).