

EZEKIEL, ETHNICITY, AND IDENTITY

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The written sources from the ancient Near East are for the most part authored from the perspective of the dominant group and yield a very limited view on people's identities from an emic point of view that would correspond to their own self-identification. Self-defined minority groups in Mesopotamia have not left behind written evidence about themselves and their identity strategies. A notable exception to this rule is the book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible. This book documents an intense and enduring attempt at reconstructing the identity of a dislocated group of people. The book of Ezekiel is produced by a group that constructed a diaspora identity from the early sixth century onwards, whether in Babylonia or in Jerusalem; in any case, it is written in an environment where the adaptation of a wide array of Mesopotamian linguistic, iconographic, literary, and theological motifs was possible. Wherever and whenever the book of Ezekiel was produced, it presents itself as a document of an explicit identity strategy of a minority group, unique among written sources from any part of Mesopotamia. It can be read as an example of the survival strategy of a group that distinguishes itself from others by way of self-reidentification. The book does not reflect a stable and universally shared identity of the Judeans. On the contrary, it creates and constructs an inner-Judean antagonism between Ezekiel's in-group and the delegitimized out-group. The book of Ezekiel, therefore, does not convey much about the integration of the Judean minority into Babylonian society but all the more about conflicts among Judeans themselves.

THE PROBLEM OF (ETHNIC) IDENTITIES IN MESOPOTAMIA

Why do identities change, and why would people have had the need for changing their identities in ancient Mesopotamia? Any answer to this question requires a delineation of what is meant by "identity," which is a debated but nevertheless indispensable concept.¹ To be able to use the concept of identity in a meaningful way, we need to recognize its multidimensional and intersectional, hybrid character. An identity can be individual or collective; a person can have multiple more or less coherent identities depending on her/his social position and relations; the identity of an individual or a community may be self-proclaimed or imposed; identities may be based on kinship, ethnicity, profession, religion, or social status (see, e.g., Vignoles 2018; Woodward 2004). Therefore, when we want to study people's identities, we first have to decide what we want to know, choose our perspective accordingly, and then look for potential sources of information. When it comes to identities of ancient people, we have to accept that these sources are defective

¹ For conceptual critique of the notion of identity as an analytical term, see, e.g., Malešević 2006; Brubaker & Cooper 2000.

in many ways, restricting our view significantly and even determining important parts of our agenda. As the present volume demonstrates, much depends on what kind of archives have been found and what kind of texts have been preserved to us.

Ancient Near Eastern identities are most often studied from the point of view of ethnicity,² perhaps even to the extent that the concepts of ethnicity and identity have been virtually fused together. This is not only due to conventional and outdated constructions of “nations” as forming fixed and stable ethnicities and identities,³ but also to the fact that there was a considerable mixture of people of different origins in the first millennium BCE. In the sources from the first half of the first millennium BCE, both Assyria and Babylonia appear as societies comprising a great variety of people with more or less identifiable geographical and cultural backgrounds. People living in Mesopotamia spoke different languages and represented different religious and cultural traditions. Sometimes, as we know from Babylonia, they were settled in communities based on their common origin, but more often than not, they are to be found scattered among the inhabitants of Mesopotamian cities and countryside.⁴ The evidence of this diversity cannot be boiled down to a system of ethnic identities, let alone “nations,” in ancient Mesopotamia, but it cannot be ignored either, since it has a great potential of revealing different strategies of self-identification and othering.

The diversity of people is largely due to imperial policies involving large-scale forced migrations.⁵ The practice of forced migration involving huge amounts of people certainly resulted in a significant increase of population with roots outside of Assyria and Babylonia.⁶ However, the mass deportations are not the only reason for people’s diversity; for example, the Arameans and Egyptians permanently settled in Babylonia are not likely to have been brought there by force.⁷ It is usually very difficult to know whether the presence of a person is the result of forced or voluntary migration. The deportations are well-reported in the royal inscriptions but only scarcely mentioned in texts representing other genres, such as letters, which yield much more information on daily life and politics.

Defining identities on the basis of gentilics, personal names, and other features we interpret as markers of identity and/or ethnicity is problematic in many ways.⁸ First, how to identify the origin or ethnicity of a person and how to recognize origin-based group identities in the sources? The diversity of people of different origins is acknowledged in the sources. This is done in different ways, laying more or less emphasis on this feature of the people in question. Most often people of different origins are identified by various types of gentilics, and

2 For studies on ancient Near Eastern ethnicities, see, e.g., Töyräänvuori 2020; Emberling 2014; Fales 2013; 2009; 2017; Bahrani 2006; Emberling & Yoffee 1999. A substantial edited volume with the title *Ethnicity in Ancient Mesopotamia* has been published (van Soldt, Katz & Kalvelagen 2005), but only a few of the 37 articles included in this book are dedicated to methodological problems (van Driel 2005; De Bernardi 2005; Roaf 2005).

3 Cf. Malešević 2006: 23–30, and in the context of ancient Near Eastern studies, Routledge 2003; Siapkis 2014. For a recent positive attempt of using the concept of identity, see Sagiv et al. 2019.

4 See, e.g., Alstola 2019; Hackl & Jursa 2015; Nissinen 2014; Streck 2014; Berlejung and Streck 2013; Zadok 2015; 2014; 2013; Wasmuth 2011; Parpola 2004; Pedersén 2005; Nadali 2005; Waerzeggers 2006; Beaulieu 2013.

5 For a classification of different types of forced migrations, see Ahn 2011.

6 On the basis of the royal inscriptions, Oded (1979), estimated the number of the deportees to amount to 4,5 million. While the ideologically biased accounts can hardly be taken as accurate, they certainly testify massive amounts of people on the move.

7 For the Aramean groups or “tribes” in Babylonia in the first millennium BCE, see Streck 2014; for the Egyptians, Wasmuth 2021; 2011; Hackl & Jursa 2015.

8 For the problems of the use of gentilics, see especially Jang 2020.

the personal names represent a wide variety of languages other than Akkadian.⁹ It is not self-evident, however, that the categories presented in the sources correspond to either the people's own identifications or to the modern scholarly categories. The self-identification of a group may or may not be identical with its external social recognition by others in the sources. The primary reason for designating a person or group may or may not be the need for a precise identification of origin, and it may serve different political and ideological purposes. It is necessary to find out whether the origin can be seen as an identity-marker of a specific group, whether people of the same origin tend to form social networks with each other, and how people may renegotiate their origin-based individual or group identities.

The second problem is how to understand gentilics and other origin-based designations of inhabitants of Assyria and Babylonia—where, why, how, and by whom they are used of certain people. The only possible starting point is formed by the designations presented by the texts, which must be scrutinized critically, paying attention to who defines whom, what is the purpose of the use of the definitions, what kind of differences are constructed by using them, and how consistently a given designation is used in different sources, that is, whether it always has the same point of reference. Specific attention should be paid to self-definitions of groups of different origins, if such definitions are available. The language of personal names forms the second obvious basis for categorization. The problem is, however, that even a personal name cannot be taken alone as an absolute marker of a person's origin or self-identification. Therefore, the prosopographical evidence must be studied in relation to other features.¹⁰

The written sources that we have at our disposal are for the most part authored from the perspective of the dominant group, that is, Assyrian and Babylonian royal court and local administration. Therefore, they yield a very limited view on people's identities from an emic point of view that would correspond to their own self-identification. There are no cuneiform texts that would consciously and programmatically represent the point of view of a self-defined minority group. Such groups in Mesopotamia have not left behind self-produced written evidence about themselves and their identity strategies. There is one notable exception to this rule, however. Certain parts of the Hebrew Bible serve as unique—and, indeed, the only—examples of texts composed by members of a minority group in Babylonia constructing its own identity, that is, the people from the former kingdom of Judah, many of whom were deported to Babylonia after the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar II in 597 and 586 BCE. The existence of the resettled Judean population is not a literary fiction, since it is documented by cuneiform evidence coming from Babylonia proper.¹¹

9 A full inventory of *c.*7,300 personal names of *c.*21,200 individual persons in Neo-Assyrian sources, indicating even the languages of the names, is presented in *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Radner 1998; 1999; Baker 2000; 2001; 2002; 2011; cf. Baker 2017). The online database *Prosobab: Prosopography of Babylonia (c.620–330 BCE)*, currently being created at Leiden University by Caroline Waerzeggers and her team, will include *c.*6,000 documents mentioning *c.*30,000 individuals.

10 A good example of how this can be done is the discussion on Yahwistic names as the criterion for identifying Judeans in Babylonia in Alstola 2019: 47–57; cf. Pearce 2015.

11 See the documentation in Pearce & Wunsch 2015; Wunsch forthcoming; cf. Alstola 2019; Zadok 2014; Abraham 2007; 2005/2006; Joannès & Lemaire 1999; 1996.

THE HEBREW BIBLE AS *EXILLITERATUR*?

Looking at changing identities in Mesopotamia through a biblical lens presupposes that the texts we know from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament reflect the change of identities, not only in what is customarily called “ancient Israel,” but also in Mesopotamia. It is well known that a major change, whether in terms of society, religion, or identity which are inextricably intertwined, took place in the aftermath of the conquest and, eventually, the destruction of Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah, by the Babylonian forces in 597 and 586 BCE.¹² Judah suffered severely from the destruction, surviving as a post-collapse society that for a long time could only maintain a subsistence economy due to a substantial loss of population and resources (see Valkama 2010; 2012). On the other hand, the forced migration of the royal court and a large number of Judean citizens to Babylonia caused an inevitable change of their collective identity from citizens of a small Iron Age kingdom to members of provincial and diaspora communities. A similar change took place earlier when Assyria annexed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 720s BCE as a part of its conquests in the Levant in 720s, resettling people from there to other parts of the Assyrian empire and moving other people to its region.¹³

To what extent the change and formation of the identity of the (ex-)Judeans was not only caused by a Mesopotamian empire but actually took place *in* Mesopotamia is another question not easy to answer for various reasons. The conquests and destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent deportations are thoroughly reflected in many texts within the Hebrew Bible as a significant part of the social memory of the people among whom the texts were written. Modern scholarship has considered the so-called “exile” a watershed in the history of (biblical) Israel, decisive even for the formation of the writings that were to form the Hebrew Bible (see e.g., Høgenhaven, Poulsen & Power 2019; Crouch & Strine 2018; Stökl & Waerzeggers 2015; Carvalho & Rom-Shiloni 2015; Kelle, Ames & Wright 2011; Becking et al. 2009; Albertz 2001; Ben Zvi & Levin 2010; Grabbe 1998).

The deportation of the Judeans is undoubtedly a historical event, just as the resettlement of people from Samaria in cities ruled by Assyria in 720s BCE (2 Kgs 17:6, 24) (see Radner 2019; Becking 2002). Just like the dispersed Samaritans can be found in Assyrian sources, the presence of Judean population in Babylonia has left clear traces in the Babylonian record. On the other hand, the “exile” is an ideological construct, whether ancient or modern. The texts reflecting this event were not written out of the need to document the deportation and diaspora but, rather, to make sense of it through a temporally and geographically extended process of interpretation; in the words of Robert P. Carroll (1998: 79), “the Hebrew Bible is a literature of dispersal and deportation, of representations and reflections on life lived outside one centre and inside other centres (centre and periphery are relativized by perspective).” The biblical perspective on the exile places Jerusalem in the centre, but we have to ask whose centre it actually was, and what defines the perspective (cf. Davies 1998).

The theological reflection of the end of the Northern Kingdom and its aftermath is different from the discourse on the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile because of the different perspective which makes Jerusalem appear as central and Samaria as peripheral. The

12 For a concise discussion of the sources related to the events of 597 and 586, see Albertz 2001: 66–80; for coping with the political consequences, see, e.g., Wright 2011.

13 See the most recent and up-to-date assessments of the activity of Assyria related to the end of the Kingdom of Israel: Novotny 2019; Frahm 2019; Fales 2019; Radner 2019 (all published in Hasegawa, Levin & Radner 2019).

insider view on the fall of the Northern Kingdom is minimally represented in biblical texts, even though the political and demographic changes were equally, if not even more, pregnant with consequences.¹⁴ Our knowledge about how the identities of the dispersed Samaritans and other Northerners developed in their new environments is equally minimal, but many Samaritans mentioned in Assyrian sources appear in relatively good positions (see Radner 2019: 113–122). No written records produced by themselves has been preserved, and we do not know if such texts ever existed.

The long process of the change of the identity of the Judeans, on the other hand, is abundantly documented in the Hebrew Bible. For the most part, the texts reflecting and constructing the new identity, such as the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua–Kings), Ezra–Nehemiah, and the book of Jeremiah, were written and edited in Jerusalem during the so-called Second Temple Period from the sixth century BCE onwards, hence the biblical texts reflecting the exile cannot be read as *Exilliteratur*.¹⁵ Even the texts reflecting the Babylonian circumstances were not necessarily written in Babylonia. Nevertheless, the very imagination of a Judean prophet sending a letter to the community of Judeans in Babylonia (Jer. 29) implies the idea that such a correspondence could indeed take place, and some of its recipients could read the letter and respond to it. The people who were resettled by the Assyrians as well as by the Babylonians typically represented the upper crust and skilled professionals,¹⁶ which was probably true for the Judeans as well (cf. the description of the deportees from Judah in 2 Kgs 24:15–16). Even the Judean king employed people with writing skills who most probably belonged to the group brought to Babylon together with other members of the Judean court. The presence of King Jehoiachin and other royal Judeans in the custody of the Babylonian court is evidenced by the so-called Weidner tablet.¹⁷

To what extent the texts included in the Hebrew Bible are likely to derive their origin from a Judean community or communities in Babylonia is difficult to define. The second part of the book of Isaiah, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 40–55), or at least the earliest parts of it, has often been argued to derive from Babylonia, although this is not the unanimous opinion of today's scholarship.¹⁸ There is a widespread agreement on the origin of the book of Ezekiel in Babylonia.¹⁹ Even this is not undisputed, however, and the long process of textual transmission warns against reading the book in its entirety the product of the Judean “Exiles” who wrote

14 A potential source of an insider view could be the book of Hosea (cf. Na'aman 2015); however, it is too difficult to know which parts of the book actually date from 720s to reliably use them as evidence deriving from that time. It certainly can be read as reflecting and interpreting the end of the last days of the Kingdom of Israel, but it is probable that this reflection for the most part took place in Judah; see Nissinen 2019.

15 “Exilliteratur” is a term for literature written in German by writers such as Hannah Arendt, Bertold Brecht, and Thomas Mann who fled from Nazi Germany 1933 and 1945: see Bannasch & Rochus 2013.

16 For Assyria, see Nissinen 2014; Oded 1979: 22–23, 41–59; for Babylonia, see Alstola 2019: 62–66.

17 I.e., a ration list of the Neo-Babylonian royal court from the year 592 BCE mentioning Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, together with 53 other Judeans, see Weidner 1939.

18 For discussion of the social context of Second Isaiah in favor of the Babylonian origin, see Silverman 2019: 72–75; for a review of the discussion with the opposite conclusion, see, e.g., Häggglund 2008: 141–149. For a recent linguistic analysis favoring the origin in Babylonia, see Williamson 2015.

19 Most recently with partly differing arguments, e.g., Strine 2018; Crouch 2018; Rom-Shiloni 2013: 140–144; Joyce 2007: 5–7; Mein 2001: 40–75, 257–263; cf. below, n. 25–26.

it in Babylonia.²⁰ However, the change of identity this book reflects is explicitly localized in Babylonia, and the diaspora identity and the troubled dichotomy between Jerusalem and Babylonia is present in all parts of the book.

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL AND THE JUDEANS IN BABYLONIA

The oldest manuscript evidence of the Book of Ezekiel, as any other book of the Hebrew Bible, comes from Qumran and Masada, the six fragments dating to the first century BCE (1QEzek, 4QEzek^{a-c}; 11QEzek; MasEzek). Together with the later manuscripts of the Septuagint Greek translation (especially Papyrus 967), these textual witnesses testify to a process of transmission that makes it impossible to read the Masoretic Hebrew text as identical to a text of the book that existed in the sixth century BCE.²¹ The lack of manuscript evidence from earlier periods leaves us in uncertainty, not only about the time and place of writing, but also about the authors and audiences of the book of Ezekiel and the details of its early history of emergence. Therefore, even the question of its authors' location in Babylonia, rather than in Jerusalem, is not a matter of course. The implied speaker (the prophet Ezekiel) addressing the implied audience (the Judean community) within the implied historical setting (Babylonia in the early sixth century BCE) cannot be straightforwardly identified with the historical authors, audiences, and settings of this text more than any other literary work.²² Thus, if we want to read the book of Ezekiel as the product of the Judean minority groups in Babylonia, this cannot be based only on the virtual world of the book itself but must be argued for.

The book itself identifies Ezekiel son of Buzi as a priest located by the Chebar river in Tel Aviv (Ezek. 1:1–3; 3:15) and date his prophecies between the years 592 and 570 BCE.²³ This prophet appears as living with his countrymen “among the community of deported” (*bētōk hag-gōlā*). This, however, is not enough to determine the time and place of the 48 chapters of the book unless one believes the entire work to be written by a single author to be identified with the implied speaker.²⁴ Arguments for the Babylonian context of the book of Ezekiel, or at least the earliest parts of it, have been developed by identifying features in the Hebrew text that are difficult to explain without Babylonian influence. The book has been found to permeate with lexical, cultural, and ideological features that are likely to depend on Mesopotamian, if not distinctly Babylonian, language, iconography, and religion.

20 Many proponents of diachronic reading identifying multiple editorial layers and *Fortschreibung* in the book of Ezekiel see it as the product of Second Temple period written in Jerusalem rather than Babylonia (see, e.g., Pohlmann 1996; Klein 2008), while others argue for the beginning of the process of emergence in Babylonia and its continuation in Palestine (e.g., Albertz 2001:264).

21 For the ancient witnesses of the text of the book of Ezekiel, see Mackie 2015; Lust 2012; Lilly 2012; Crane 2008; Brooke 1992.

22 E.g., Poser (2012) reads the book of Ezekiel throughout as a literary fiction and the “traumatized prophet” as a literary phenomenon; cf. Schöpflin 2002, who reads the book as a fictional theological (auto)biography.

23 These years are converted from the dates given in Ezek. 1:1–2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1.

24 The prophet Ezekiel's single authorship and a minimal contribution of other hands is presumed by the “holistic” reading of, e.g., Greenberg 1983; 1997; cf. Block 1997a; 1997b; Peterson 2012. Rom-Shiloni (2013: 185–196) largely accepts Greenberg's holistic approach, however arguing for a later strand written by the prophet's followers in Ezek. 34–37.

While some features, such as the plethora of Akkadian loanwords in the Hebrew of Ezekiel,²⁵ can be explained as simple borrowing of contemporary vernacular, others are suggestive of the adaptation of a knowledge that was not readily available for everyone in a diaspora community but had to be acquired by education.²⁶ I mention only a few illustrative cases. The vision of God leaving his temple in Ezekiel 10 and returning again in 43:1–3 is another example of the divine alienation—divine reconciliation pattern, well known from Mesopotamian sources from different times.²⁷ The inaugural vision in Ezekiel 1 contains so many motifs known from Mesopotamian iconography that it is likely to presuppose knowledge of Mesopotamian, sometimes specifically Babylonian, cosmology, astronomy, and theology.²⁸ The pairing of 150 and 40 days in Ezekiel’s symbolic act of lying on his left and right sides to mark the impending siege of Jerusalem (Ezek. 4:4–8 LXX) can be explained by the figuration of totality in Mesopotamian mathematics (Winitzer 2014: 170–174). Moreover, the book shows familiarity with Mesopotamian texts. Motifs peculiar to Ezekiel can be found in comparable usages in the eighth-century BCE Babylonian *Poem of Erra* (Bodi 1991). Intended allusions to *Gilgameš Epic* have been found especially in the oracles against Tyre, where the highly enigmatic expression *tuppêkâ ûnêqâbêkâ* (28:13) may reflect the initial words of *Gilgameš* as used in the designation of the tablet in colophons: *tuppi* {#} *ša naqba imuru* “Tablet {#} of ‘The One Who Saw the Depths’” (see Winitzer 2014: 199–205). The architecture of the temple of Jerusalem as described in the vision of chapters 40–48 has been found well comparable to the available evidence of Neo-Babylonian temples (Ganzel & Holtz 2014).

Such a wide array of features indicating Mesopotamian/Babylonian influence on the language and ideology means that the book of Ezekiel could only have been written in an environment where the adaptation of all these linguistic, iconographic, literary, and theological motifs was possible. This, admittedly, does not absolutely locate the book of Ezekiel in Babylonia. The literati in Jerusalem in Neo-Babylonian and Persian times may have been well enough aware of and connected with the dominant imperial culture to learn such Babylonianisms even in Jerusalem; perhaps those Judeans who returned from the exile from the late sixth century on brought this knowledge with them to the Old Country.²⁹ In the absence of conclusive evidence of such returnees, even this theory remains speculative.³⁰ When these and many other features are read as a part of a text that explicitly constructs an identity of displaced people in relation to their place of origin, it becomes evident that the text emerged out of the diaspora situation.

The *Golaorientierung* as such does not confirm the dates and the place mentioned in the book of Ezekiel but justifies reading the book from the perspective of a group that actually

25 E.g., *ḥašmal* (1:4, 27; 8:2) < *elmešu* “amber”; *eškār* (27:15) < *iškaru* “work, assignment”; *gallāb* (5:1) < *gallābu* “barber”; *nādān* (16:33) < *nudunnū* “gift, dowry”; *dērôr* (46:17) < *andurāru* “manumission”; *sūgar* (19:9) < *šigaru* “neckstock”; *šāšar* (23:14) < *šaršerru* “red clay, paste, pigment”; and many others. Even phrases may be translated from Akkadian, such as *mā ’āmullā libbātēk* (16:30) “How I am incensed against you” reflecting the idiom *libbāti malū* “to be angry with.” See Vanderhooft 2014: 106–114; Winitzer 2014: 165–170; Stökl 2015a.

26 For the likelihood that the authors of the book of Ezekiel had cuneiform education, see Stökl 2015a; Stökl 2015b; cf. Winitzer 2014.

27 See Block 2000; cf. Kutsko 2000. For Neo-Assyrian examples, see Nissinen 1998: 37–40.

28 See Uehlinger 2015; Uehlinger & Müller Trufaut 2001; Odell 2003. Even the double current flowing from the temple and of the trees of healing growing on the riverbanks (Ezek. 47) has counterparts in Mesopotamian iconography; see Bodi 2015.

29 Cf. e.g., Klein (2008: 402–404), who interprets the earliest version of the book of Ezekiel as reflecting the conflict of the returnees and those who remained in the country.

30 For a recent assessment of the available evidence, see Grabbe 2015; cf. Becking 2009: 28–29.

constructed a diaspora identity from the early sixth century onwards, whether in Babylonia or in Jerusalem. The strong preference of the displaced for those who remained in the Old Country is present in significant parts of the book, which may point more strongly towards a Babylonian than a Jerusalemite standpoint. The Babylonian perspective is not eclipsed by the possibility that significant parts of the book were written in the Persian period, since communities of Judeans were demonstrably still there, while hard evidence of the returnees is enigmatic at the best and points towards a slow process of small waves of return.³¹

Importantly, as already mentioned, we know that there were Judeans in Babylonia—not only during the so-called “exilic period” but even later. The available evidence demonstrates the existence of Judeans in different positions in Babylonia. The palace archive of Nebuchadnezzar II includes texts concerning the distribution of sesame oil to certain groups and individuals often of foreign origin, such as Philistia, Phoenicia, Elam, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and even Judah. The most prominent of the Judeans receiving oil rations is Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and his five sons. Moreover, a group of eight Judeans is mentioned in the ration lists, and the palace archive knows Judean courtiers (*ša rēš šarri*) and other persons with Yahwistic names (Qana-Yama, Samak-Yama, Šalam-Yama, as well as Uru-Milki who is explicitly described as Judean) (see Alstola 2019: 58–78; Pedersén 2005).

A fair number of individuals with Yahwistic names are known from documents belonging to the Murašû archive of economic and legal texts documenting credit granting and agricultural management.³² The Judeans appearing in these documents typically belong to the class of subsistence farmers cultivating modest plots of land, but some of them had even larger holdings indicating a somewhat higher socioeconomic position.³³ The most recent corpus of Babylonian cuneiform documents consists of more than 200 unprovenanced tablets originally deriving from places called Bit-Našar, Bit-Abi-Râm, and Al-Yaḥudu, the last mentioned place name denoting the origin of the inhabitants. These places are situated in the countryside near the city of Nippur between the river Tigris and the southern marshlands.³⁴ The Judeans appear predominantly as subsistence farmers whose economical transactions are mostly tax payments and credit operations related to agriculture. Most Judeans do not occupy higher-level positions of the society, since they were not free to alienate their landholdings; a few of them, however, are attested as officials such as tax-summoners (*dēkû*). Two individuals of Judean descent stand out because of their long-term economic activity and independent businesses in the region: Aḥiqam, a rent farmer who owned a brewing enterprise in Babylon, and Aḥiqar, who granted credit to landholders to help them to pay their taxes.³⁵

Apart from those belonging to King Jehojachin’s entourage, most Judeans seem to have lived in the countryside. There were Judeans who were in constant interaction with people from the urban upper class, but they did not seem to belong to the same social circles. The Judeans used the services of Babylonian scribes but were not otherwise engaged in their social networks (cf. Alstola 2019: 275). There are no sources mentioning the education of the Judeans in Babylonia, but since a number of alphabetic scribes (*sēpiru*) with Judean names are known

31 In the words of Oded Lipschits (2003: 365), “the ‘return to Zion’ did not leave its imprint on the archaeological data, nor is there any demographic testimony of it.”

32 The texts are published in Stolper 1985; Donbaz & Stolper 1997.

33 For a thorough analysis, see Alstola 2019: 164–222.

34 At the moment of writing, 113 tablets have been published in Pearce & Wunsch 2015; Abraham 2007; 2005/2006; Joannès & Lemaire 1999; 1996. For the rest, see Wunsch forthcoming.

35 For a full analysis of the Judeans from Al-Yaḥudu and surroundings, see Alstola 2019: 102–163.

from the cuneiform sources, it seems that even Judeans could serve in positions that required administrative literacy.³⁶ The book of Ezekiel, however, is a powerful witness of the utilization of highly developed scribal skills—not just of basic literacy but of the production of literature of high linguistic, stylistic, and theological sophistication.

The big question is, thus: where and among whom did the Hebrew scribal culture survive? Jerusalem, of course is a possible answer, since it is extremely unlikely that scribal culture in its entirety moved from Judah to Babylonia after the destruction of Jerusalem. But if any part of the book of Ezekiel originates from Babylonia, there must have been a social space that endorsed such activity, fulfilling at least a considerable minimum of permanent material and educational requirements. To all appearances, the Judean deportees, at least those belonging to the first wave in 597 BCE, consisted for a large part of the elite (cf. Crouch 2018: 351). The literati were certainly among this elite, and even though they could no longer enjoy their elite position as before, it would be strange if the displacement caused their interest in education and scribal learning to cease altogether, if there was even a limited possibility of continuing such learned enterprises.

Our sources open two windows dividing the view into two disconnected landscapes: the bureaucratic view on everyday life in rural Babylonia in cuneiform documents and the scribal vision of the theological world of the book of Ezekiel with little interest in mundane businesses. These parallel worlds hardly communicate with each other, and it is difficult to know to what extent their creators were aware of each other. The division of sources may reflect a split in rural and urban communities of Judeans, the former appearing in the cuneiform documents and the latter as the implied audience of Ezekiel. All this is speculation, but the very existence of the book of Ezekiel nevertheless testifies to a continuous scribal activity going on somewhere, perhaps in a more urban context, without leaving a trace in the haphazard administrative record that has ended up in our hands.

The cuneiform documents testify to a significant degree of integration and acculturation of the Judean population in the Babylonian society (see Pearce 2014; 2011; Wunsch 2013), even though the intensity of the interaction of the rural Judeans with other groups should not be overestimated. As Tero Alstola (2019: 272–276) has shown, the deportee communities known from the extant sources appear as relatively homogeneous and able to preserve their own identities. In theory, this could have been done by way of writing, of which the available sources, however, remain silent. Even the book of Ezekiel with its allusions to Mesopotamian learned traditions can be seen as an example of a high degree of acculturation (often *per viam negationis*), but its socio-cultural location remains a riddle that can be solved only with a great deal of speculation. Whatever the solution, the book of Ezekiel can be read as minority literature, demonstrating the identity construction of a group that actively recreates itself in diaspora circumstances brought about by imperial policy.³⁷

36 The *sēpirus* were officials who performed various administrative functions. Only one of the Judean *sēpirus*, Hanan-Yama, appears in the Al-Yahudu texts; according to Alstola's estimation, he was not a high-ranking official but, rather, "one of the petty officials attested in the Murašû archive" (Alstola 2019: 203). The rest of the Judean *sēpirus* can be found in the palace archive of Nebuchadnezzar and especially in the Murašû archives; see Bloch 2018: 379–397.

37 Cf. Liebermann 2020, who studies the clothing and adornments of the Assyrians and Babylonians as described in Ezek. 23 as a way of portraying the Mesopotamians as something "other," thus constructing a distinct Judean identity.

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN EZEKIEL

Wherever and whenever the book of Ezekiel was produced, it provides itself as a document of an explicit identity strategy of a minority group, unique among written sources from any part of Mesopotamia. It can be read as an example of the survival strategy of a group that distinguishes itself from others by way of self-re-identification (cf. especially Rom-Shiloni 2020; 2013: 139–197; 2005). The need for the renewed negotiation of the group identity is caused by the break with the past identity bound up with Jerusalem—its location, worship, tradition, political structures and socioreligious hierarchies. The two Babylonian invasions meant more than just displacement; they first made a muddle of social structures and eventually put an end to the temple worship. Jerusalem was still there, but after 586 BCE Judean kingship was no more, the temple was gone and the maintenance of the symbolic world of the community was seriously disturbed.

The in-group of the book of Ezekiel is identified in the text as “(the house of) Israel,” but who are the people behind this designation, and who should be identified as the out-group against which the in-group demarcates itself? These questions can be answered on the textual level, but any attempt to identify historical groups behind the text is inextricably intertwined with the overall theory of the emergence of the book of Ezekiel, which increases the risk of circular reasoning. The virtual equation of the implied author and audience with the prophet Ezekiel active in Babylonia will result in a dramatically different historical reconstruction than reading the text as literary fiction written in Judah in the Second Temple period. A synchronic reading reckons with a single place and a short time period, while a diachronic reading may point towards different temporal and geographical contexts.

In any case, the in-group present in the textual world is located in Babylonia. Dalit Rom-Shiloni has argued for the deportees of the first wave in 597 forming the in-group of the most part of the book of Ezekiel,³⁸ which makes sense at least with regard to the implied audience, whether or not it is equal to the historical group of people located in early sixth century Babylonia.³⁹ The prophet is presented as belonging to the in-group who identifies itself as a true “house of Israel” continuing the covenantal relationship with God in Babylonia. However, such an ideological, rather than socio-political, entity is difficult to convert to a historical group, time, and place, especially if the text is the result of a long process of transmission.

As to the identification of the out-group, one could easily think about the surrounding Babylonian society and its representatives, but this is not the case. The book exhibits no interest in the Babylonian physical, cultural, or religious environment. No concrete circumstances in “the land of the Chaldeans” are described, no places mentioned (except for Tel Aviv on the canal of Chebar), no Babylonian people referred to (except Nebuchadnezzar). Even the long cycle of oracles against nations (Ezek. 25–32) leaves Babylon untouched. Such a remarkable

38 Rom-Shiloni (2013: 139–197), identifies (only) two ideological strands within the book of Ezekiel. “The first, which I have traced back to the prophet himself, is the voice of extreme exclusivity, the voice that declares the Jehoiachin Exiles to be the prestigious, one-and-only legitimate community of the Judeans. The second strand, which may be traced through minor modifications within the prophecies of consolation (Ezek. 34–37), broadens the in-group to include all Exiles, regardless of their time of deportation. Thus, this second strand suggests an inclusive perspective, but it is important to note that the in-group is still *restricted* to those in the exilic community” (Rom-Shiloni 2013: 196).

39 Cf. Kratz 2015: 62, “The Book of Ezekiel evidently argues for the primacy of the (returned) Babylonian exiles above those who had remained in the land.”

disinterest in the Babylonian realities cannot be coincidental but should be understood against the idea that the prophet is

not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel— not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to them, they would listen to you. But the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. (Ezek. 3:5–7.)

This indicates an “insular, ethnocentric attitude” (Strine 2018: 309), which virtually ignores the real world around the discourse that is most explicitly addressed to other Judeans who, according to the text, deserve divine condemnation. The ethnocentric attitude does not need to be interpreted as reflecting an isolated historical context, however.⁴⁰ The ignorance of the real world shifts the emphasis from the historical to the textual world.

The out-group, thus, clearly consists of other Judeans—but which Judeans? The Judean population was since the beginning of the sixth century BCE split into the majority that survived as a post-collapse society in Judah and the minority that was resettled in Babylonia. Despite the common discourse of “the Exiles” as a single group with shared identity and experiences, the Judean population in Babylonia was hardly a homogeneous group (cf. Strine 2018: 292–298). It was brought there in two or more⁴¹ waves, which may have caused internal tensions among the Judean communities. It is possible that the second group of people who were deported to Babylonia after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE did not immediately integrate with the first group that was taken there in 597 BCE with King Jehoiachin.

It may also be that only the people belonging to the king’s entourage ended up as urban-dwellers while the majority of the first group and all the subsequently deported were settled in the countryside around Nippur. Hence, besides the obvious split between the displaced Judeans and those who remained in Judah, there may have been an urban-rural divide among Judeans located in Babylon and those who lived in an agricultural environment (see Pearce 2014: 179–180), and perhaps even a further divide between Judean populations that arrived in Babylon in different waves. The out-group of Ezekiel, thus, may not be a homogeneous entity either. It explicitly includes the population that remained in Judah after 597 (see Rom-Shiloni 2013: 140–185), but since the decisive criterion of the out-group is its illegitimacy in the eyes of the in-group, the out-group does not need to be bound to one place or time.

The virtual reality constructed in the book of Ezekiel is Jerusalem-centered, and even the prophet is not confined to his quarters in Babylonia since the spirit of God can take him from there to Jerusalem to witness how God’s Glory leaves the temple and the city (Ezek. 8–11). If the book has little to say about the life of the Judeans in Babylonia, it is not a bit more interested in anything that is really happening in Jerusalem and Judah. In a way, the book of Ezekiel exhibits an explicit

40 Such as the “Camp” Chebar, that is, a remote isolate locale where Ezekiel and his audience is envisioned by Strine 2018: 302–305.

41 A third deportation in 582/1 BCE, unknown from any other source, is mentioned in Jer. 52:30: “in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadrezzar, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard took into exile of the Judeans seven hundred forty-five persons; all the persons were four thousand six hundred.” The verses Jer. 52:28–30, missing from the Septuagint translation, are probably an addition to the Masoretic text of the book of Jeremiah not included in the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the Septuagint translation. In spite of this, many scholars assume these verses to be based on contemporary records; see de Waard 2020: 85–86. According to Hermann-Josef Stipp (1994: 92–93), it is a literary unit that existed independently before it was added to the present context.

and pronounced interest in the homeland, typical to diaspora communities even today.⁴² By the same token, it reveals quite as little about the reality in the homeland as it does about the conditions in Babylonia. Obscuring social realities is due to the focus on Jerusalem, which is neither nostalgic nor realistic but ideological—and expressly negative (cf. Rom-Shiloni 2013: 169–183). It emerges from the socioreligious situation which is less motivated by the minority position of a certain group in the Babylonian society than by the trauma caused by the loss of identity and the need of constructing a new one by theological means.⁴³ The explanation of the displacement is fully theological, the deportation being explained as the result of the divine abandonment of Jerusalem and Judah caused by the sins of its inhabitants (Ezek. 4–10). This interpretation of events is used to legitimate the in-group which is placed in Babylonia, making it the recipient of the promises of return and restoration (Ezek. 34; 36–37; 39:25–29) culminating in the vision of the reconstruction of the temple of Jerusalem in chapters 40–48.

EZEKIEL AS MINORITY LITERATURE

Returning to the problems mentioned at the beginning of this article, let us take a look at how the book of Ezekiel might help us to cope with the difficulty of recognizing ethnicities and identities in ancient Mesopotamia. The book of Ezekiel, as many other parts of the Hebrew Bible, is a rare specimen of scribal activity of a non-dominant population group in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires. Thanks to the authoritative status this text enjoyed from the time before the Common Era, the Hebrew texts thus preserved did not share the fate of the contemporary, largely disappeared and unknown texts written in Aramaic. Despite all the problems related to the date, location, and transmission of the text of Ezekiel, it is undeniably an ancient text historically connected to a historical minority group, the diaspora status of which is its main topic.

The reason for the existence of the minority group appearing in the book of Ezekiel and, thus for the emergence of the text itself, is forced migration. The book of Ezekiel would not exist without the Babylonian invasions and eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 597 and 586 BCE. It documents an important and otherwise poorly known aspect of the forced migration policy of Mesopotamian empires, that is, the perspective of a minority group coping with the consequences of the imperial policy—either in the Persian province of Yehud or, as seems to me more probable (see also, Nissinen 2015), in the Babylonian context of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian period.

Either way, the book of Ezekiel documents an intense and enduring attempt of reconstructing the identity of a dislocated group of people. The perspective on the (sub)group and its identity is manifestly emic and the group is self-identified. “Israel” and other designations are not imposed on the group by the authorities of the dominant group (who, *nota bene*, did know to name a settlement Al-Yahudu, recognizing the Judeans as a separate group) but serve as tools of the group’s own self-re-identification; in the words of Carly Crouch (2018: 349): “whatever complexities of this reality, Israel imagines itself as the sons and daughters of a single ancestral house.” The new identity is self-proclaimed and divinely authorized by God’s word mediated by the prophet Ezekiel. In fact, the text does not tell all too much about the old identity that is being reformed, since everything belonging to the past is described in fiercely polemical terms.

42 See Malkki 1995: 24, quoted by Crouch 2018: 352–357.

43 For a reading of the book of Ezekiel from the perspective of trauma, see Poser 2012. Cf. also several contributions to Kelle, Ames & Wright 2011; e.g., Smith-Christophers 2011; Carr 2011; Sharp 2011.

The identity of the in-group of the book of Ezekiel is origin-based, indicating a strictly defined “ethnicity” based on common God, ancestry and geographical origin rather than a nation-state; Judah, denoting a political entity, is not used as the designation of the in-group.⁴⁴ The Judeans were identified as a specific group by the Babylonian society, but this identification may not exactly correspond with the self-identification of Israel in the book of Ezekiel, at least when it comes to the in-group. The criteria of belonging to the in-group of the book of Ezekiel may not have been shared by all Judeans, and not even recognized by the local authorities. The book of Ezekiel cannot be used as evidence of a fixed, stable, and universally shared identity of the Judeans. On the contrary, it creates and constructs a deep inner-Judean antagonism between Ezekiel’s in-group in Babylonia and the delegitimized out-group, whether in Babylonia or in Judah. The book of Ezekiel, therefore, does not tell a lot about the status and integration of the Judean minority in the Babylonian society but all the more about conflicts within Judeans themselves.

The traces of knowledge of Babylonian culture indicate that the group that produced the book of Ezekiel did not live in isolation but communicated both within and beyond their Judean subculture. Furthermore, the dense intertextual network between Ezekiel and other Hebrew texts, especially the book of Jeremiah and the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26),⁴⁵ suggests that a connection to the learned circles the Old Country was kept up as well.⁴⁶ The book could only emerge within circles educated in scribal skills at least in Hebrew, if not in cuneiform, and who, therefore, must have belonged to an elite faction of the Judean community. This segment is not represented in the cuneiform documentation, hence the book of Ezekiel—if any part of it was actually produced in Babylonia—serves as important evidence of the continuation of Jerusalem-based scholarship in the Babylonian context.

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44 Only in 8:1, the “elders of Judah” coming to visit the prophet Ezekiel seem to belong to the in-group. The word Judah is typically used of the country (8:17; 21:2, 25; 25:3, 8, 12, 15; 27:17) or the tribe (37:16, 19; 48:7, 8, 22, 31), sometimes in tandem with the country of Israel (4:6; 9:9). Judah is mostly depicted as the object of doom, never as the recipient of a divine promise. Cf. Lee 2016.

45 There is a plethora of interpretations of this intertextuality with differing conclusions, see, e.g., Adam 2019; Sweeney 2012; Rom-Shiloni 2012; Lyons 2009; Müller 2010.

46 No correspondence between Judeans in Babylonia and Jerusalem comparable to that between Elephantine and Jerusalem (TAD A4.1–10; see Porten et al. 1996: 125–151) has been found so far; the evidence of Judean merchants suggests that not all Judeans were confined to their settlements, see Alstola 2017).

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