

Babylonian Exile and Development of Biblical Text

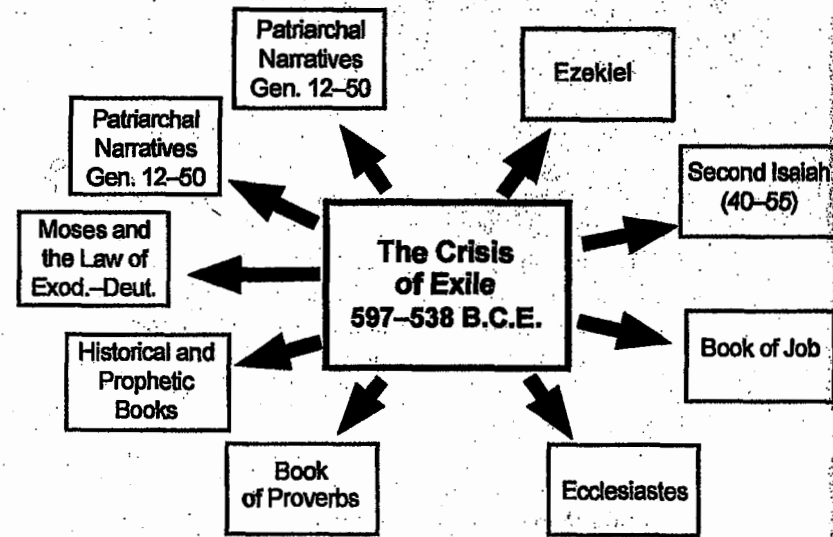
Cynthia Chapman, *The World of Biblical Israel*, pages 25-28

Exile as the Context for Scriptural Formation

- Why did a military conquest and deportation cause the Judeans to record and preserve their history in writing and pass it down from generation to generation?
- First and foremost, the Bible tells a story, one that's organized into a simple chronology.
 - The story starts "in the beginning" with the creation of the world; it moves forward in time to the appearance of Israel as a family under the patriarch Jacob, who is renamed Israel. Then, we have the emergence of Israel as a nation of twelve tribes united, who conquer the Promised Land of Canaan. We move forward in time to the establishment of Israel as a kingdom, its conquest and deportation, and finally, the resettlement of the land.
 - This same history, however, could be told paying special attention to the contexts within which individual stories were written, compiled, edited, and retold. In this case, the exilic experience becomes a filter for which national stories are preserved and how they are presented. The crisis of exile posed questions. And the Judeans worked through those questions in part by recording their history, the history of who they had been when they were in their land.
- Psalm 137's question, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" is really a way of asking: How can we pass on or preserve a sense of identity in our children while we are in a foreign land?
- If we examine the Bible in this way, the neat, linear timeline is replaced by a messier kind of diagram. But this messier version is likely much better for understanding what life was like in ancient Israel.

Lecture 2: By the Rivers of Babylon—Exile

"Timeline" of Biblical Text Development



- In the center of the diagram is the exilic period, beginning in 597 and lasting until around 538, when some Judean exiles began returning to their homeland.
- In this period, Judeans began to reach back into their past to make sense of their present situation. Our diagram shows arrows going backward in time, representing an effort to retrieve and preserve history in order to retell it for children born in exile.
- Not all of biblical history was written during the exile; rather, the context of the exile determined which histories to preserve and how to present them. Some of the scribal activity that began in exile involved gathering, sorting, and shaping existing written materials.

- In such books as Ezekiel, Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, and Job, we find the Judeans struggling with questions that could not be answered with existing histories and writings: Why are we being punished for the sins of our parents and grandparents against the covenant? What if our god is not just, not accessible, or not knowable? Has our god forgotten us?