

DIASPORA DISTINCTIVES: EXPERIENCES OF DISPERSION, IDENTITY, AND REVITALIZATION IN OLD TESTAMENT ISRAEL

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***Abstract:** Drawing on the Old Testament as an authentic source of Jewish cultural memory and the analytical scholarship of Diaspora Studies, this article spotlights and compares the prominent characteristics of the ancient Israelite diasporic experiences in Egypt, Babylon, and Persia. These experiences are reflected upon from a missional perspective to understand contemporary diasporic experiences of people groups across the globe. Most relevantly, these themes are applied to the modern Sri Lankan diaspora, especially that of Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Persian Gulf.*

***Keywords:** Ancient Israelite diasporas, natal identity, natal land, national revitalisation*

1. Introduction

The Israelite experience of diaspora (Latin for dispersion) in the Bible coalesces around two seminal events of mass displacement. At the beginning of their founding narrative, the Hebrew people emerge as the Israelite nation out of the sojourn of their patriarchal clans in Egypt where they had been enslaved. At the close of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites and Judahites (Jews) either return from their homeland from exile in the Babylonian Empire or remain as a network of Jewish communities in the Persian Empire which has granted them freedom to remain or return.¹ The two experiences at each end of the

1. The term 'Hebrew(s)' is most commonly used as a clan name for the descendants of Abraham and Sarah in the early patriarchal narratives of Genesis and Exodus. After the exodus and conquest, the twelve tribes

OT story serve as bookends to the Jewish national narrative. While there is considerable debate about the precise meaning and content of the word *diaspora* as it is currently used, I will follow Robin Cohen's definition as communities with shared identities such as "language, religion, custom or folklore", that "have settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories", and that maintain some sort of loyalty and emotional links with "the old country."²

The study of diasporas, like the study of many other historical phenomena, often begins by building on archetypes or progenitors. The experience of the ancient Jewish diaspora described in the Hebrew Bible provides a foundational model for diasporic study. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin go so far as to say that "Diaspora ... may be the most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world"³ The diasporic landscape of course, is today as wide as the horizon, the word itself being a cipher for scattered communities of many different nationalities and ethnicities.

The study of Israelite diaspora usually commences with the captivity of the northern Israelite population by the Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser III and Shalmaneser V in the eighth century BC and the deportation of the southern Judahite inhabitants by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in the later part of the sixth century BC.⁴ The exiles of Israel and Judah were relocated in several settlements across these empires as labour communities (1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Kings 17:6; Ezek. 1:3; Ezra 8:15, 17, etc.). In his definition of diaspora, Cohen's first criteria is of

are called 'Israel/Israelites' after their common ancestor Israel, the name given to Jacob. When the united monarchy under David and Solomon separates into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, the designation 'Israelite' becomes specific to the northern populace and southern tribes are designated 'Judahite(s)' or 'Jews/Jewish'.

2. Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), ix.

3. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, "Generation and the Ground of Diaspora" in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Jana E. Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 110.

4. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 3.

a community that has experienced “dispersal from an original homeland...to *two or more* foreign regions.”⁵ In this case, the sojourn of the Hebrews in Egypt from the time of Joseph to the Exodus would not constitute a true diaspora. However, given the Hebrew community’s tribal cohesion and alienness in Egypt, its strong sense of Canaan as natal land, and the later references to return from exile as a new exodus qualifies their Egyptian ‘disaporic’ experience as a worthy of comparison.

2. The Jewish Diasporic Experience in Egypt

From Israel’s experience in Egypt seven elements of diasporic significance emerge that seem well reflected in the experience of many diasporas today.

2.1. The foundation of an incipient national identity

Scattered people are not necessarily a diaspora unless they perceive themselves to be at least marginally bound to each other by such affinities. All true diasporas have their roots in at least an incipient shared identity, whether that is linguistic, religious or ethnic. As Cohen reminds us, “the idea of a shared origin ... is a common feature of diasporas”, and “acts to ‘root’ a diasporic consciousness and give it legitimacy.”⁶ From the recurring invocation of their rudimentary beliefs in El/Elohim, the high god who hand bound himself in covenant promise to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Hebrews evidently drew a sense of tribal kinship tied to a ancestral theology.

2.2. The impetus of a collective crisis

Cohen points to different centrifugal forces that cause the dispersal of peoples and proposes a typology of “victim, labor, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas,” each representing a different cluster of motivations for types of

5. Ibid., 26. Italics mine.

6. Ibid., 184.

diasporas.⁷ Genesis recounts that the Hebrews' sojourn in Egypt had been caused by a severe famine, which would make it a "victim diaspora" in In Cohen's typology. James Hoffmeir comments that "epigraphic and archaeological data clearly demonstrates that Egypt was frequented by the peoples of the Levant, especially as a result of climatic problems that resulted in drought...from the end of the Old Kingdom...through the Second Intermediate Period."⁸. Entering Egypt as refugees, the Hebrew community was at the mercy of its Egyptian neighbours and the vicissitudes of the pharaonic state.

2.3. The influence of powerful advocacy.

Fortunately for the Hebrew community in ancient Egypt, vulnerability and weakness were balanced at least twice by the considerable intervention and support of two powerful advocates. The first was Joseph, whose advocacy served the community at the time of their arrival in Egypt. The second was Moses whose advocacy engineered their departure from the land some four centuries later.

It is interesting to note that both men rose and addressed the needs of the Hebrew diaspora in hours of its greatest vulnerability. The key to such a diaspora's survival will often rest in the hands of those who pursue their advocacy. When Joseph's 'poor relatives' sought refuge in Egypt, they had the inestimable advantage of having an advocate serving in the host nation's second-most powerful public office. With Joseph's influence, the transition from settled community in Canaan to diaspora community in Egypt was made infinitely easier. The community in fact thrived and multiplied (Exodus 1:7). What is clear is that this surely could not have happened without the timely and discerning advocacy of Joseph.

Like Joseph, Moses was himself a Hebrew by birth but through extraordinary circumstances had become a

7. Ibid., 21.

8. James Hoffmeir, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 68.

privileged member of the Egyptian court and used his royal connections to the advantage of his kinfolk. Wherever diasporas have appeared, their ability to cope and often thrive has been in large part due to those who carry influence and weight in the corridors of power in their host countries and are willing to use these advantages to serve their communities.

2.4. The legacy of negative historical associations

When a particular diaspora begins to take root in a host nation, it brings with it a package of associations and linkages that are often unintentional and can be detrimental to its role as a minority within the mainstream culture. The Hebrew diaspora in Egypt were compelled to face the fallout of the xenophobia resulting from the Hyksos interregnum of about 150 years during which an aggressive Semitic peoples invaded and ruled much of Egypt.⁹ The Hyksos usurpation was deeply resented and eventually driven out by Ahmose in 1570 BC, who founded Egypt's 18th Dynasty and the New Kingdom era.¹⁰

The shared Semitic origin of the Hyksos invaders and the Hebrew diaspora, both of whom arguably made Egypt their home for a limited but overlapping period of time.¹¹ Semitic culture was in many ways vastly different to that of Egypt. The inherent tensions between the two cultures can be clearly seen in the latter part of the Joseph narratives in Genesis where differences of language, vocation and personal grooming are specifically mentioned (Genesis 42:23; 43:32; 46:34).¹²

9. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 59-61. See also S. David Sperling, "Hyksos," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2008, Jewish Virtual Library. http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0009_0_09361.html (Accessed March 20, 2025).

10. Eugene H. Merrill, Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 199-), 54-55.

11. James Hoffmeier, "What is the Biblical Date for the Exodus? A Response to Bryant Wood," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (June 2007): 68.

12. For a brief discussion on the interface between Egyptian and Semitic culture, see K.A. Kitchen, "Egypt, Egyptians," *Dictionary of the Old*

It is possible that the Hebrews enjoyed greater favour under the Hyksos usurpers because of their shared Semitic culture. If this is so, the ejection of the Hyksos and the reassertion of native Egyptian power would have placed a burden on the Hebrews.¹³ Egyptian concerns that the Hebrew population was increasing and could become a dangerous “fifth column” threatening Egyptian security (Exodus 1:9-10).

Diaspora communities with connections to the host nation’s rivals would always come under suspicion of disloyalty and could easily be scapegoated in times of national crisis.

2.5 The experience of marginalization and exploitation

As a means of keeping the growing Hebrews in check, they were reduced to slave labor by the Egyptian authorities and set to work in the construction of public works projects. When this failed, a policy of male infanticide was put into place with the obvious intention that Hebrew women would be forced to marry into the local Egyptian population and thus achieve a *de facto* assimilation (Exodus 1:15-22).

Physical and economic exploitation such as the Hebrews experienced in Egypt is easily attested to in the growing world of the diaspora today. Whether they are under-paid Mexican migrant workers in the U.S., or sexually exploited Filipina house maids in the Middle East, physical abuse and political and economic exploitation have often been hallmarks of the diaspora experience.

2.6 The inheritance of shared diasporic memory

Cohen’s introduction to the subject of global diasporas seeks to modify earlier attempts by Safran to delineate a set of features that give a measured definition

Testament: Pentateuch (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2003), 209.

13. According to John Walton it has been common to understand the relationship of the Israelites to the Hyksos in this way. See J.H. Walton, “Date of Exodus,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 263.

to the term diaspora.¹⁴ Among his modifications of Safran's characterization of diasporas, he includes the corporate experience of a single formative and catalytic event. Cohen states that "dispersal from an original centre is often accompanied by the memory of a single traumatic event that provides the folk memory of the great historic injustice that binds the group together."¹⁵

This implies that part of what binds a scattered group together is the corporate memory of a shared negative experience. Cohen limits this to a "single traumatic event." The Hebrew experience in Egypt however would suggest that the binding power of a negative experience can be much broader than a single event. While their initial transition from settled community to diaspora community was brought on by a famine that was traumatic enough, it was in fact the lengthy experience of shared misery and exploitation over many years that fixed itself particularly in the collective memory.

Significantly, neither were the experiences simply preserved in an informal folk memory. According to Gerhard Von Rad, the collective diasporic memories were safeguarded in Israel's cultic confessions.¹⁶ Her diasporic roots were to be rehearsed and remembered (cf. Deuteronomy 26:5-8). Further, the Exodus narrative itself attests to a *documentary* recording of the events, and not simply an oral tradition. It is interesting that the legal code which eventually emerged as Israel's "constitution", specifically enjoined the Israelites of later days not to forget that they had once been "aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34) and "slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 6:21). Once the Hebrews were permanently settled in Canaan, the Levitical code concerning the Hebrew management of debt and personal property frequently based its appeal on remembering the fact that the Hebrews

14. See W. Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83-99.

15. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 23.

16. Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 1-78.

had been “brought out from the land of Egypt” (cf. Leviticus 25:36, 38, 42, 55).¹⁷ The memory of having been an exploited diaspora was to be rehearsed and never forgotten.

What is of particular interest in the case of the Hebrew experience in Egypt is the specifically stated purpose for what might seem to be an unnecessarily morbid rehearsal of the past. The repeated call to remember the painful diasporic past clearly had in mind a constructive and positivist future. The shared memory was *not* to serve as a nursery for fostered feelings of bitterness, revenge or retribution, but as a motivation for the ethical and just treatment of the alien communities the Hebrews were to one day find living as minorities in their own midst (cf. Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Deuteronomy 15:15). As Wright observes, “the treatment of aliens within their own (Hebrew) society...was to be marked with compassion, born of the memory of Egypt where it had been denied to themselves.”¹⁸

2.7 Abiding historical and theological links to natal land

The account of the Jewish experience in Egypt suggests yet one more element characteristic to many diasporas. Students of the diaspora phenomenon such as Cohen and Safran inevitably include in their lists of pan-diasporic features a “collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements” and “an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation.”¹⁹

Put simply, all diasporas acknowledge the idea of “the old country”, the conception of a linkage, actual or perceived, to a natal land that lays some claim on the community’s loyalty and emotions. Perhaps no diaspora in history so clearly demonstrates this as does the Jewish diaspora. The association of the Jewish people with

17. Christopher Wright. *Living As the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 83.

18. *Ibid.*, 179.

19. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 26.

the “promised land” of Canaan is not only the engine behind the modern Zionist movement and the creation of the secular State of Israel, but also an association that traces itself back to the very origins of the Hebrews as an identifiable community.

What was and is true of the Jewish community continues to be true for many diaspora communities around the world today. Whether they are Lebanese in Australia or Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, the shared sense of autochthony and natal land continues to play an important part in shaping the self-perceptions of scattered communities abroad. The claims and counterclaims to natal land are part of the diasporic landscape, a landscape often tragically transformed into vicious battlegrounds, and must be taken seriously in addressing the problems and challenges faced by emerging diasporas today.

3. The Jewish Diaspora Experience in Babylon and Persia

Following their dramatic exit from Egypt recorded in the Book of Exodus, the Hebrews eventually settled in Canaan. For the next one thousand years, the Israelite nation established itself in the land, eventually becoming a monarchy. With the advent of Solomon’s son Rehoboam, the Israelite kingdom was tragically split into two with the secession of ten of the original twelve tribes. The political map now comprised of two sibling nations, the ten seceding tribes making up the northern Kingdom of Israel, and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin making up the southern Kingdom of Judah and centering itself around the Davidic capital of Jerusalem. In a world shaped by voracious imperialistic appetites, the viability of the two small Jewish kingdoms was inevitably threatened and brought to the brink of extinction. In 722 B.C. the northern kingdom was decimated by an Assyrian juggernaut and its population forcibly marched off to the hinterlands of the Assyrian empire.²⁰ Some 130 years later in 586 BC it was the turn of the southern kingdom of Judah to see its glorious temple

20. Bright, *History*, 275. See also Merrill, *Kingdom*, 398.

and its capital in Jerusalem destroyed by the surging Chaldeans, its population dragged off in chains to Babylon.²¹

The exiled populations of the northern kingdom were largely assimilated to their (enforced) host cultures and eventually lost their identity as a unique and discernible people.²² However, the trajectory of the Judahite population of the southern kingdom of Judah was significantly different than that of its northern neighbor. Not only was its Jewish identity and distinctiveness preserved but it also flourished and spread.²³ With the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and the deportation of the bulk of its population to Babylon, the Judahite kingdom ceased to exist. Jewish life and identity now largely rested in the hands of the diaspora transplanted in the heart of the Babylonian empire.²⁴

Here, unlike their deported northern neighbours a century or more earlier, the Judahite diaspora grew and flourished. Over the course of the next several hundred years they staged what was in fact nothing less than a most remarkable comeback, multiplying in numbers and influence across the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world. Indeed, such was the increase that it is estimated that by the time of Christ, 7% of the Roman

21. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 453.

22. Bright, *History*, 275. See also R.L. Hubbard Jr., "History of the People of Israel", *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol.2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 917. Some of the northern Israelite population were resettled by the Assyrians in the Babylonian regions where they may have been more likely to retain much of their Israelite identity. They may have served as precursors to the Jewish exiles from the southern Judahite kingdom brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar after the Babylonians revolted against the Assyrians and established their own empire. See "The Babylonian Exile-1/Beginnings," *Theophyle's Biblical-ANE Blog* (The Divided Monarchy – 14/14 Epilogue, September 25, 2009) <<http://theophyle.wordpress.com/2009/09/25/the-babylonian-exile-1-beginnings/>> (Accessed March 20, 2025).

23. For a more detailed account of the historical experience of the Jewish exiles in Babylon as well as the Jewish communities scattered elsewhere after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, see Jill Middlemas, "Exile, Migration, and Diaspora After the Fall of Jerusalem in the Sixth Century BCE" in *The Biblical World*, 2nd ed., edited by Katharine J. Dell (London: Routledge, 2021), 519-537.

24. Bright, *History*, 453.

Mediterranean world was said to have been Jewish.²⁵ Hedlund, quoting Harnack, concludes that the total Jewish population at this time “amounted to around four and one-half million at the beginning of the Christian era – one million each in Syria, Egypt, and Palestine, plus one and a half million in Asia Minor, Europe, and Africa.”²⁶

Whatever the precise details, it is clear that the Jewish diaspora in Babylon laid the foundations for a diasporic identity that would eventually grow in reach and impact far beyond its size and time. The question of interest is of course how this happened. In particular, what were the distinctive characteristics of the Jewish diaspora in Babylon that gave them the impetus to so energetically flourish and grow?

3.1 Diaspora distinctives of the Babylonian/Persian Exile

Two diasporic characteristics emerge uniquely from the period of Israel’s Babylonian exile. As with the Egyptian captivity, these emerge from the narratives surrounding the time and find ready parallels in many subsequent diaspora experiences in history.

3.1.1 The credibility of healthy diaspora-host interaction

Tragic as the loss of Jerusalem and its centerpiece temple were to the Jewish community, the exiled diaspora’s response to Babylonian overlordship was never one of disengagement and detachment. To the contrary, one finds in both the Biblical and secular records, plenty of evidence that the Jewish exiles wasted little time in becoming part of the fabric of the empire.²⁷ This was in fact, the implicit instruction of no less powerful a voice than the prophet Jeremiah. He had warned of Jerusalem’s impending destruction for years, and then had been an eyewitness to it. Nevertheless, once the inevitable took place, he urged a

25. Roger Hedlund, *God and the Nations* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 155.

26. Ibid.

27. Richard De Ridder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971), 66.

spirit of accommodation. To those exiles who may have been embittered by the experience, and to those who no doubt dreamed of a quick return home, Jeremiah gave instructions to settle, raise families and seek the welfare of their host nation (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Constructive long-term engagement with the host culture was to be the pattern. The ancient covenantal dictum that they had been called to be a blessing to the nations was to be as true for them as a *diaspora*, as it was for them as a settled nation.

No doubt the pace for this was set early on with the education and advancement of young Daniel and his associates in preparation for a lifetime of civil service in the Babylonian administration. The Biblical evidence, corroborated by occasional Babylonian records, testifies to a community that by and large adjusted remarkably well.²⁸ Cuneiform records of the time reveal Jewish names on Babylonian military rolls and business transactions.²⁹ There can be little doubt that the artisans and craftsmen brought over from Jerusalem were well employed in Babylon's many building projects.³⁰ The capacity of this transplanted community to flourish can be surmised from the fact that when given the opportunity to return to the natal land under Ezra many years later, the majority elected to stay in Babylon where life was undoubtedly more amenable.³¹

The Jewish experience in Babylon, and in the Persian empire that followed it, demonstrates that a diaspora community can work proactively within a host culture, engaging it in positive ways that do not compromise its essential identity.

28. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 471.

29. The archive of the Murašû family's financial dealings with various clients (454-404 BC) include about eighty distinctively Israelite names. See chapter "Judeans in the Murašû Archive" in Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 164-222.

30. Ely Emanuel Pilchik, *Judaism Outside the Holy Land: The Early Period* (New York: Bloch, 1964), 106.

31. Merrill, *Nation*, 473.

3.1.2 Revitalization of natal identity

The Jewish exiles in Babylon became Jewish Babylonians, proactively engaging in the socio-cultural milieu of their day. And yet, as we have pointed out above, they never divested themselves of their Jewish distinctiveness. While becoming Jewish *Babylonians*, they never lost their identity as Babylonian *Jews*.

Over the next few centuries, Babylon in fact became a major center of Jewish revival and revitalization. It is estimated that by the time of Christ, Babylon alone had a Jewish population numbering one million or more.³² This is a remarkable achievement in light of the fact that the initial influx of Jews into Babylon at the time of the exile likely numbered no more than 36,000 to 48,000 men, women and children.³³ The simple fact is that while the formal “exile” was short in that it lasted some seventy years, as Paul Johnson puts it, “its creative force was overwhelming.”³⁴ It was here that the institution of the synagogue first developed and flourished.³⁵ Jewish scholars and scribes developed a Babylonian Talmud and a Masoretic school that produced a corpus of invaluable biblical texts and manuscripts.³⁶ Babylonian centers of Judaism rivaled all others for generations.

The resurgence of the Jewish diaspora was remarkable, all the more so as Jewish identity had for hundreds of years been centered on a physical relationship to Jerusalem, and in particular to its glorious Solomonic

32. S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, I, (New York: Columbia University, 1937) 132; Louis H. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), 219.

33. Jewish Encyclopedia, *The Babylonian Captivity*, 2002. < http://www.bible-history.com/map_babylonian_captivity/map_of_the_deportation_of_judah_jewish_encyclopedia.html > (Accessed March 20, 2025).

34. Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 83.

35. De Ridder, *Discipling*, 77-79. Also see W.S. Lasor and T.C. Eskenazi, “Synagogue,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Vol.4* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 677.

36. Pilchik, *Judaism*, 103ff. Also see Merrill, *Kingdom*, 481-482.

temple. With the destruction of both it is amazing that the diaspora community retained its faith, uniqueness and self perception at all, and indeed fostered its growth. The fact remains however that it did. As De Ridder states, "Israel threw off the vestment of her statehood together with her kingdom with remarkable ease and without apparent internal crisis."³⁷ Davies attributes the vitality of later diasporic Judaism to "its ability to detach loyalty from 'place', while nonetheless retaining 'place' in its memory, that enabled Pharisaism to transcend the loss of its land."³⁸

The Jewish community it seems, displayed a remarkable propensity to adapt quite comfortably to its new surroundings. By Esther's time a hundred years later, Jewish communities had scattered over the length and breadth of the Persian empire, remaining a distinct and discernible identity wherever they settled (Esther 3:8). For better or for worse, the Jewish diaspora retained its core identity, being distinct enough that in any of the 127 provinces of the Persian empire, it could be recognized and marked out (c. Esther 3:13).

This dissociation of the Jewish diaspora from physical political hegemony over a natal space is, according to the Boyarins, a "lesson" that the Jewish experience of diaspora has to teach the diasporic milieu today, namely that "... peoples and land are not naturally and organically connected", and that "it is possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling land ...".³⁹ The relevance of this to the claims and counterclaims of any number of modern competing diasporic return movements are easily discernible.

37. De Ridder, *Discipling*, 76.

38. William D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 103.

39. Boyarin and Boyarin, "Generations," 110.

4. Factors Contributing to the Revitalization of Jewish Natal Identity in Babylon and Persia

4.1 The continuity of Jewish leadership structures

Nebuchadnezzar's battering rams had made short work of a Judahite national theology in which Yahweh's promises of a never-ending Davidic dynasty and Zion as its inviolable capital. Jerusalem's destruction and the deportation of the royal family did not, however, result in a leaderless Jewish rabble in Babylon. It is interesting to note that Jeremiah's letter to the community exiled in Babylon is addressed to "the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon" (Jeremiah 29:1). Such clues suggest that leadership structures still functioned to some degree among the diaspora community in Babylon.

Even a semblance of the Jewish monarchy was to some degree retained. While Jehoiachin, the next to last king of independent Judah, had been marched off to Babylon together with his family in the second deportation, we are told that the Babylonian king eventually released him, put him on a royal stipend and afforded him royal recognition. (II Kings 25:27-30). In Babylonian tablets he is referred to as "King of Judah", and it is apparent that the Jewish community in Babylon continued to look on him as the rightful Judahite king in opposition to his uncle Zedekiah who had replaced him on the Judahite throne in Jerusalem's final years.⁴⁰

Therefore, one of the reasons for the relative health and stability of the Jewish diaspora can be traced to the existence, operation and continuity of familiar Jewish institutions of leadership that provided a semblance of structure and stability for a community seeking to find its feet in a strange land.

40. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 452.

4.2 The influence of Jewish prophets

The prophetic message before the final fall of Jerusalem was generally very critical of a nation that had largely abandoned any genuine adherence to the covenant law of Moses. However, once the destruction of Jerusalem was complete and the bulk of the Jewish population were now exiles in a strange land, the tone of the prophetic message changed dramatically. The latter parts of both Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies glow with hope for the future of God's chosen people. While these prophets were not physically present in Babylon, their words accompanied and consoled the people. As Bright says, "... their affirmation ... of the ultimate triumph of Yahweh's redemptive purpose provided men with a hope to which they could cling."⁴¹ The prophets Ezekiel and Daniel were among the exiles and their words encouraged their fellow captives not to lose hope in God's plans for them in the years to come.

4.3 The example of Jewish statesmen and women

The iconic stories of Daniel and the lions' den; Shadrach, Meshech, Abednego and the fiery furnace; Queen Esther risking her life before the Persian king for her people, sustained ethnic and national pride. Such people gave to the diaspora living examples of loyal citizens of the empire who carried weight in high places, who in the same breath were unapologetically Jewish. What is sure is that as such stories are told and retold, the cohesiveness of a scattered people is strengthened and the shared associations revitalize and invigorate the community.

4.4 The power of renewed faith

Another primary reason for the growth and flowering of the Jewish diaspora at the beginning of the exile was the renewal of its commitment to the covenant. Fidelity to the covenant with Yahweh had been seriously compromised

41. Bright, *History*, 349.

through much of their history. According to the prophets, this was the very reason Yahweh had forsaken Jerusalem and allowed His covenant people to be driven from the land. The hiatus in Babylon however was never meant to be final. Its purpose was to discipline and restore. Its ultimate goal had always been the turning of the people's hearts back to their God in repentance.

In their initial years as a vulnerable diaspora, they rediscovered a fresh faith in God and His covenant law. Evidence for this is found in the fact that the Jews at this time became what one might call the first truly monotheistic people. Further evidence lies in the missionary efforts the Jewish diaspora engaged in as they continued to spread throughout the Near East and the Mediterranean world. De Ridder and Hedlund document the passion and energy of Jewish missions during the period between the OT and the NT and ascribe much of the astounding multiplication of Jewish populations at the time to this missionary activity.⁴² A renewed sense of spiritual calling and purpose gripped their hearts, and put a disparate broken people on a fast track to rejuvenation.

4.5 The renewal and revitalization of ties to the natal land

By the end of the exilic period, the majority of Jews lived outside the 'promised land'. Diaspora was now the predominate expression of Jewish life. Interestingly however, the last chapter of the OT narrative was not a diaspora story. Though it was in fact a minority story, it was one in which the locus was once again the promised land.

In 538 BC, the first year of his reign in Babylon, Cyrus issued a decree mandating the re-establishment of the Jewish community and religion in Palestine.⁴³ Over the next one hundred years, the biblical narrative indicates that several waves of Jewish exiles took advantage of this

42. See Hedlund, *God and the Nations*; De Ridder, *Disciplining*.

43. Bright, *History*, 361; D. Clines, "Cyrus," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol.1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 847-848.

opportunity to return to the land of their fathers.⁴⁴ Under the leadership of men such as Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the returnees were able to restore a semblance of Jewish life and religious practice in Jerusalem and its environs. From this reseeded of the natal land eventually grew the million-strong Jewish community that populated Palestine by the time of Christ.

Two observations arise in regard to the relationship of the 'return movement' and the diaspora that remained at large in the Persian empire. The first is that only a very small percentage of the Jewish diaspora actually returned to their native land.⁴⁵ This, as noted above, was no doubt due to the fact that life in the empire had brought the diaspora a fair measure of settled comfort. Life in the natal land on the other hand, had little to offer but the exhausting struggles of rebuilding on the ruins of a bygone era. Therefore, a return to the natal land simply did not generate widespread enthusiasm among the Jewish diaspora.

This however did not mean there was a radical 'disconnect' between the diaspora and its sense of natal land. Whether one chose to return or to stay, no Jew could ever deny his or her natal links to the land. "By the rivers of Babylon", the captive exiles had sung, "there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1) "If I forget you, O Jerusalem," they continued, "may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Psalm 137:5-6).

Despite threats to his life, Daniel's orientation to his natal land was expressed by physically facing Jerusalem three times a day in his prayers (Daniel 6:4-10). Clearly, neither the threat of death nor long years in exile had dimmed his attachment to Jerusalem as his true spiritual home. Sometime later, while noting that the seventy-year exile prophesied by Jeremiah is close to completion

44. Ezra and Nehemiah give passing descriptions of these returns. The post-exilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi give additional background regarding the struggles the returnees faced.

45. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 493.

(Daniel 9:2), Daniel was stirred into a majestic prayer of confession on behalf of his people. In it he refers to “the land,” “Jerusalem,” “the inhabitants of Jerusalem,” “your holy mountain,” “your city Jerusalem,” “your desolate sanctuary,” and “the holy mountain of God” ten times in eighteen verses (9:3-20). After a lifetime among the exiled diaspora in Babylon, the natal land and its spiritual associations clearly remained the focus of his heart.

There can be no doubt that Daniel’s attitude to his natal land was to some degree reflective of the attitude of the rest of the diaspora to their homeland. While it is true that the numbers of returnees to Palestine were small, the fact remains that under the leadership of men like Zerubbabel and Sheshbazaar, over 50,000 exiles did indeed make the journey back to Palestine, and rebuilt their lives on the ruins of Jerusalem and its environs. The vast majority of these returnees were Jewish exiles who had been born and raised in the diaspora and had likely never set eyes on the land of their forefathers. Yet they returned! A deeply held sense of shared natal roots energized them into a radical return to a homeland they would only be seeing for the first time.

Not only were the numbers of returnees *not* insignificant, they were indicative of a much larger diaspora community that would have been necessary to support and finance such a venture. Indeed, Ezra makes clear that financial support for the first wave of returnees under Zerubbabel not only came from the king’s treasuries, but from the pockets of the diaspora. (Ezra 1:6) Clearly the vision of the natal land generated a momentum that continued in the years to come. In 458 BC, some eighty years after the first return, Ezra led a second return to Palestine.⁴⁶ Though much smaller in size, it is indicative of a continued interest among the Jewish diaspora in matters relating to Palestine. Roughly thirteen years later in 445 BC, it was the turn of Nehemiah to make his way to Jerusalem. The impetus that pushed him sprang from the same deep

46. Ibid., 502.

sense of identification with natal land that had so moved Daniel, Ezra and countless others (cf. Nehemiah 1:1-4). Once again there seems to be a strong thread of deep emotive identification with the natal land that neither time nor distance could remove.

The interplay between the Jewish diaspora and natal land that has been described above surfaces two dynamics that are worth pausing to note. The first is that the deep attachment of the Jewish diaspora to the concept of a natal land was a value that bound the scattered community together. This is underlined by the distinction many diaspora Jews made between 'exile' and simple 'dispersion'. In the mind of the Jewish diaspora, these were not synonymous terms. The Jews were not simply a people in dispersion. They were a people in exile. As Davies says,

That Jews outside Palestine conceived of their existence not simply as a dispersion meant that, wherever they were, they were still bound symbolically, theologically as well as historically, to their home base, to Eretz Israel: they were not simply scattered. The Diaspora maintained the notion of its existence as (*an*) exile.⁴⁷

Thus, as a people who perceived themselves a nation in 'exile' the land remained a viable, emotive and living issue. There was a fundamental orientation to the natal land that bound the dispersed men and women of Israel together. Shared linkage to a natal land is an affinity that continues to bind diasporas of all shapes and sizes together today. And the emotions and feelings that are generated in the hearts of scattered people who dream of ancient homelands, find their diasporic ancestors in the scattered Jewish communities of the Bible.

A second diasporic dynamic arises from the association of the global Jewish family in Biblical history to its natal land. It is noteworthy that the renewal and revitalization of Jewish life *in* the land came from the Jewish diaspora *outside* the land. It is clear from the accounts in

47. Davies, *Territorial*, 80. Italics mine.

Ezra, Nehemiah and the post-exilic prophets, that left to itself the replanted Jewish community struggled to maintain covenant uniqueness as the people of God. Spirits quickly flagged, and social and religious compromise rapidly became the *modus operandi*. It was from the heart of the *diaspora* that the challenge to covenant faithfulness in the land so often came to the rescue. It was not “insiders”, but “outsiders” like Ezra and Nehemiah who brought renewal and recommitment to those who had resettled in the promised land.

Perhaps, in an age of increasing change and globalization, every nation wedded to its soil needs fresh air and new perspective from a diaspora from without, if it is to survive and thrive.⁴⁸ Thus it seems to have been in the OT history of Israel from beginning to end.

5. Diaspora Context of Sri Lanka

We have sought to understand the Jewish experience in the OT through a diasporic lens. From the accounts of the experience in Egypt and Babylon/Persia, seven salient characteristics have emerged that lent the diasporic community its cohesiveness and durability.

While these distinctives were lived out in a unique way by the ancient Jews, their experience was not just an historical anomaly. The patterns and experiences that emerged from their story have been reflected in the stories of diasporas ever since. This includes not only the peoples of Sri Lanka, but the growing communities of scattered Sri Lankans around the world. Struggling to cope with recurring cycles of economic, social and religious insecurity, Sri Lankans in large numbers have in recent years have sought solace and security beyond the shores of their island. Today they form an integral and distinctive

48. Illustrative of this point, Cohen says, “Although born in China, Sun Yixian (Sun Yat-sen) developed his political consciousness in Hong Kong and in the Chinese community in Hawaii. His Society for the Revival of China was a crucial instrument in the promotion of a modern Chinese nationalism.” *Global*, 185.

piece of the global diaspora jigsaw puzzle, sharing together in the joys and sorrows, and the challenges, opportunities and distinctives that mold and shape many other diaspora communities. They also form an important part of the socio-economic patchwork that makes up modern Sri Lankan society, contributing significantly to the country's economy and ever-changing social culture.

While hard statistics are difficult to nail down, and by nature constantly in flux, it is estimated that over three million Sri Lankans now reside and work in host countries around the world.⁴⁹ The largest single component of this three-million-strong diaspora are made up of short or long term “guest workers” who have found employment in the region of the Persian Gulf. Following a pattern established since the mid-80's, recent statistical records of Sri Lankans leaving the island for employment abroad suggest that over 81% of Sri Lankan labour migrants find employment in the six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (the GCC) plus the neighboring states of Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.⁵⁰ This suggests that the Sri Lankan diaspora community in the above specified region would number somewhere between 2 and 2.5 million, or between 8 and 10% of the natal population of the country.

How does all of this relate to our earlier exploration of the experience of the Hebrew diaspora in the OT? As noted above the patterns and experiences of the Hebrew diaspora of old are reflected in the patterns and experiences of diaspora populations throughout history. The present Sri Lankan diaspora, and in particular the vast bulk of that number who live and work in the Middle East are no exception. In numerous ways their experience of diaspora reflects the experience of the captive Hebrews in Egypt and the exiled Israelites in Babylon. From our study of

49. Office for Overseas Sri Lankan Affairs. <https://oosla.lk/#:::text=An%20estimated%20total%20of%203,host%20countries%20around%20the%20world.,> (Accessed March 20, 2025).

50. *Annual Statistics of Foreign Employment: 2023*, Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment. <https://www.slbfe.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/sodapdf-converted-18_compressed.pdf> (Accessed March 24, 2025) (Subsequently cited as *ASRFE: 2023*).

these two periods of Jewish diasporic history a number of diasporic characteristics emerge that lend themselves to an understanding of the Sri Lankan presence and experience in the GCC.⁵¹ Whether that is through the lens of the various “push and pull” factors that shaped each diaspora; whether it is through the challenges of marginalization and exploitation they both share; whether it is via the avenues of diaspora advocacy into which both have tapped; whether it is by means of positive host/diaspora interactions or through continuing links to the diasporic natal homeland from which they both draw, the affinities of the Sri Lankan diaspora in the Middle East to its OT ancestor are remarkable.

Remarkable, but not perhaps surprising, and this for both historical and theological reasons. Historically the Jewish diaspora has served as a catalyst and archetype for many diaspora studies, lending much of its ethos, vocabulary and imagery to the discussion. More importantly from the perspective of theology and mission, we have noted that God’s redemptive concerns and engagement with the OT diaspora are reflected in His redemptive concerns and engagement with global diasporas and the general movement of peoples throughout history.

51. For a full discussion of the relationship and affinities of the Old Testament diaspora and the Sri Lankan diaspora in the Middle East, see Ted Rubesh, *Wandering Jews and Scattered Sri Lankans: Viewing Sri Lankans of the Gulf Cooperation Council through the Lens of the Old Testament Jewish Diaspora* (Portland, OR: Western Seminary, Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2014).