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Imagining Lives

Historical Context

A disaster is marked by what it takes away. It takes away nearly everything. The nation of Judah underwent a series of unfolding disasters in the sixth century B.C.E. The Babylonian Empire (centered in present day Iraq) invaded Judah three times, occupied it for close to fifty years, and with each invasion deported some of the nation's leading citizens to Babylon. These events brought Judah to the brink of extinction, a point long embraced by Jeremiah's interpreters.

Imagining Little Stories of Disaster

To set the background for the book of Jeremiah, I want to imagine what it might have been like to live in Jerusalem when the mighty Babylonian Empire breached the city walls of Jerusalem, Judah's capital city. But before presenting Judah's larger historical narrative, I begin by inventing small stories of families living in Jerusalem during the second invasion (587 B.C.E.). I take the drastic step of inventing lives because I think Shoshana Felman is correct when she writes: "So much historical coverage of history functions to empty it from its horror."¹ Felman means that the writing of history usually eliminates human suffering—the blood, the pain, and the horrors—from its reports about the past. Too often it dehumanizes victims and overlooks the horrible consequences of events for real people.²

Historians, of course, are properly cautious not to overstate what the evidence allows them to report. Yet the suffering depicted in biblical texts arising from the Babylonian Period contrasts sharply with most modern historical accounts of the time.³ From the point of view of trauma and disaster studies, the "facts" simply do not convey the full tragedy that accompanied Babylonian

aggression.⁴ This prompts me to wonder what stories victims of this disaster might tell if they had been in my class?

With apologies to Gary Herion, who writes about the “Great” and “Little” traditions of monarchic Israel,⁵ I want to enter into the great events of Judah’s history by way of small ones, by telling little stories of families rather than of nations. I am encouraged to do so by the book of Jeremiah itself, because it also speaks about the massive historical disaster through little stories about the prophet, stories that seem to gather up elements of the whole thing. Perhaps by imagining the human toll of the Babylonian assault upon Judah, these stories may help readers experience the vibrant power of Jeremiah’s beautiful, difficult words.

Because such stories do not exist in any of our historical sources, I have to make them up. But fiction, too, can be a mode of truth-telling. It can help us think and feel our way into lives of others on a more human scale than some historical reports. Since life in ancient Judah centered upon the extended families and upon community rather than individuals, my four stories of violence and survival are situated within family households.

The Asher ben Jacob Family

When the Babylonian army broke through the fortified walls surrounding Jerusalem, the siege of the city had been going on for nearly two years. Hoped-for help from Egypt or from anywhere else has not arrived. News recently reached the city that outlying towns to the south were no longer returning signals to the Judean army, so the Babylonian forces were turning their full attention to Jerusalem. For their whole lives, Asher ben Jacob’s family had lived in a two-room house, built adjacent to one of the walls of the city that were to protect it from attack.

Noises of troop movements and battle preparations disturbed the days and nights in the neighborhood. The Babylonian army was building siege ramps up to the wall of the high-perched city with less and less opposition from the demoralized and exhausted Judean army. But the noise was growing more deafening. Babylonian soldiers were using battering rams to pound against the city wall a short distance from Asher’s home.

On this summer day in July 587,⁶ Asher did not return from his duties as a guard outside the king’s palace. Asher’s wife, Peninah, was in the house with their five children, Asher’s mother, and two female cousins. With no sign of Asher or any other male relative in sight, the women and children faced the army’s onslaught alone. Loud crashing sounds near the wall and fearful screams of neighbors filled Peninah with paralyzing fear. The Babylonians must have breached the wall because soldiers were pouring into the street, and no Judean

defenders were in sight. With the help of her two cousins, she gathered, grabbed, and pushed her five children and mother-in-law out the door and down a path toward her father's house a short distance away.

When they got there, her father's household was in chaos. The women and her elderly father were throwing pieces of fruit and grain into a burlap sack, along with a cooking pot. Everyone was shouting at once. Their intent was to run for their lives. Babylonian soldiers with spears and swords were shouting in a foreign language and bashing down doors at the far end of her father's street. Soldiers were invading homes in search of men who might resist them, of booty, and, Peninah knew, of women to rape. She ran with members of both households as they scrambled down back alleyways and through neighbors' gardens, trying to stay together and keep track of her children. Terrified neighbors crushed upon them, and an elderly aunt fell in the crowded melee. They lost her in the rush, and Peninah soon lost track of her two oldest children among the throngs of people also running to escape the soldiers. Shrieks and confusion built as the stampeding crowd grew larger.

The two youngest children, an infant and a toddler, had been screaming but eventually grew quiet from fear and weakness as they made their way out of the city. None of her immediate family had eaten much since the Babylonians made camp outside the city nearly two years earlier, but in the past weeks the food was cut off completely. Throughout the siege, Asher had been able to supply them with bits of fruit and grain from the palace, but three days earlier he had come home empty-handed. Food was scarce even in the king's household. On the road out of the city, Penninah's family tried to stay together. Eventually they made their way north with a stream of refugees to the city of Mizpah in Benjamin. Perhaps it would be safer there, even though they had no family to take them in. Perhaps there would be food, shelter, and less violence.

Asher never rejoined his family. Although he was only a soldier—neither royalty nor priesthood—he was a strong man and a potential resister. When Babylonian soldiers captured him, they executed him on the spot, though Peninah and the family would never know what happened to him, nor to her aunt or her two oldest children.

The Micah ben Nahor Family

Less fortunate than Peninah, Deborah, wife of Micah, lived in another small house near the market stalls outside the temple where she sold fruit for a rich farmer. Her husband had been killed in the first siege of Jerusalem ten years earlier and two of her sons had been taken away by the king's men to serve in the army. Now Babylonian soldiers surrounded the temple. They set it on fire along with the outbuildings and small businesses around it. Deborah escaped

the burning neighborhood with four children and some neighbors and found a temporary hiding place in a shed for animals at the large estate that belonged to a wealthy, influential family. They were hiding there only a few hours when Babylonian soldiers came to the big house and began dragging out the occupants. Deborah and the children had to flee again. A good distance away they found refuge in a small cave in a hillside where other people were also hiding, including a few more of her stunned neighbors.

When the city grew quiet some days later, she and three others slipped out in search of food. As they surveyed the ruined streets, they feared further violence from bands of Babylonian soldiers guarding the city, but hunger—the children’s and their own—forced them forward. What they found was a landscape of destruction. Streets were unrecognizable, filled with stony rubble from destroyed buildings. Corpses of citizens lay unburied, and animals and birds seemed to have disappeared completely. They began searching for food in the half-standing buildings, desperate for anything to bring back to feed the children. They met others also ransacking empty, half-destroyed buildings for food or for valuables to trade. Deborah became obsessively focused on accumulating whatever she could carry.

She and a few companions hobbled back to the cave and managed to hide with their children for several weeks, making forays into the devastated streets only late at night. When the turmoil in the city began to diminish, some of the cave dwellers set out in search of a place to live. They came to the house of the wealthy family where Deborah and her children had first hidden and found it empty except for a few old indentured servants who now lived in the big house. With some of their loot, they were able to bribe the servants for fruit from the scraggly trees in the garden and for shelter in the shed now empty of animals.

Deborah’s children were hungry all the time. Her two young sons went to gather wood and her daughter to draw water from a nearby well, but other Judeans were demanding payment for these basics of survival. Rumors reached them daily of girls being raped and of young men being rounded up and forced to grind grain or carry wood and water. Three of Deborah’s children watched as soldiers hung two Judean princes by their hands.⁷ Her youngest son and her daughter now sat in the corner. They stopped speaking. Life was a misery and survival a daily challenge. She could not pray, nor even weep. Nothing made any sense.

The Noach ben Amoz Family

Noach and his extended family used to live in the big house where Deborah, her children, and their new companions came to find shelter. Noach was a “servant” of the king, a highly placed officer in charge of the treasury and an overseer of

tax collections. Although his position afforded his family many privileges and a wealthy way of life, he greatly disliked what it required of him. Palace intrigues made his situation precarious and left him guarded and suspicious of everyone around him. And he had to extract taxes from the people. His neighbors hated him for the strenuous collection tactics he oversaw in the city, as greater and greater amounts of their harvests, their animals, and their treasure were demanded or taken forcibly from them.

For decades, the Judean kings were compelled to pay increasingly high tribute, first to Assyria, then Egypt, and now to Babylon. According to one of Noach's fellow court officers, the king's decision to stop paying tribute probably precipitated the invasions by the Babylonian army to attack them in the first place. But the people and the land had already been wrung dry under the tax system.

Now Noach, his wife Abigail, their four teenage sons, three younger daughters, two elderly parents, and numerous cousins were being herded off with other families of the king's officers and priests who had survived the invasion. Babylonian soldiers treated them like cattle. They cut off their hair, stripped some of them, shackled them together, and forced them to march, while they insulted them and threatened them with whips. They had not gone far when Noach's father fell, and a soldier killed him for hindering the march. The walking was strenuous and, even for the most able-bodied, the physical discomfort was enormous and the shame beyond bearing. These once-powerful families, along with some of the king's relatives and friends, were being marched around the Fertile Crescent to Babylon, where, if they survived, they would be sent to labor in the fields or to work in the cities. Survival seemed unlikely.

The Eli ben Levi Family

Among the deportees was a priest named Eli and his family. Eli was relieved that some of his priestly brothers seemed to have eluded the soldiers, or at least he hoped that was what their absence meant. But he was devastated by the violence he had witnessed. He felt as if he were going crazy. Even though he had long expected the triumph of the invaders over the rabble that was left to defend Jerusalem, he could not believe it was actually happening. That the Babylonians had dared enter the holy city of God and destroy God's temple outraged him. How could this happen? How could the temple built by Solomon, the place where God promised to live with them forever, be burned to the ground by these barbaric heathen? He had no words for this unspeakable indignity to his people and to their God. Watching the temple invaded by foreigners was like witnessing a rape. Seeing the blood of his fellow priests spilled in the sacred place was a pollution and an abomination. Where was their God?

Difficulties of Imagining the Past

My flat-footed stories of families caught in the siege convey only the barest approximations of the terrors these historical times wrought in Judah. Modern, Western readers cannot climb far into the lives of ancient peoples; our worlds are too different. We hold vastly dissimilar beliefs about the roles of family and individuals, about government, religion, God's role in history, and even of what is important about the past and how best to tell it. But the ancient people of Judah were thinking, feeling human beings connected with us by common humanity, by desires and hopes, pain and loss, love of family and friends, and by faith in God. Communication between our disparate worlds must be possible.

By imagining lives of families caught in the vortex of historical forces over which they have no control, I hope to suggest the contexts out of which arose the searing power of Jeremiah's words and to coax the book from its confinement in the closed container of the past. Perhaps in the corners of our vision, we may glimpse some of the horrors Shoshanna Felman finds missing from the writing of history.

Imagining the Great Story

The larger narrative of Judah's history indicates that the national catastrophe began a century before and continued for decades more. That means among other things that the disaster was an enormous, enduring set of destructive events, and it is these that gave birth to the book of Jeremiah.

In the century before the Babylonian invasions, Judah's situation was already precarious. Old Testament historian John Bright describes matters this way: "Seldom has a nation experienced so many dramatically sudden reversals of fortune in so relatively short a time."⁸ The first major reversal of fortune came from the aggrandizing incursions of the Assyrian Empire (more or less present day Syria). In 721 B.C.E., this cruel, aggressive empire destroyed Israel, Judah's sister-nation to the north. Twenty years later, the Assyrians also invaded Judah, and only the capital city of Jerusalem escaped destruction (Isa 36:1—37:38). The Assyrians demanded heavy tribute from Judah, a tribute that imposed crippling taxes upon the population, hindered the economy, and interfered in Judah's internal affairs.

When Assyria finally weakened, Judah faced new dangers from Egypt in the South. Trying to fend off the Egyptian advance, Judah's long-reigning King Josiah died in battle in 609 (2 Kings 22:1—23:30; 2 Chron 35:2-24).⁹ His death sent shock waves through the nation.¹⁰ Egypt then appointed a king, Jehoia-kim, from among Josiah's sons. In 605 Babylon, also called "Neo-Babylon" or "Chaldea," defeated Egypt and became the dominant power in the region.

This brief survey shows that even before Babylon appeared on the international horizon, Judah had been attacked, defeated, and dominated by another imperial power. Judah's own life was severely crippled.¹¹ But the subsequent rise of Babylon at the end of the seventh century B.C.E. would bring disaster upon Judah.

The First Invasion

Judah's King Jehoiakim may himself have provoked the first Babylonian attack upon the nation. Although he had cunningly switched allegiance to Babylon when it gained supremacy over Assyria, he rebelled against them a few years later. The Babylonian response was swift. On 16 March 597 B.C.E., the empire attacked Jerusalem and deported the new king, Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim had died), along with other prominent citizens and treasures from the Jerusalem temple.¹²

The Second Invasion

Seeking a more compliant Judean on the throne, Babylon's ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, appointed Zedekiah to be king (Jer 32:7; 2 Chron 36:10). The book of Jeremiah presents Zedekiah as a weak, vacillating leader (chaps. 37–38), but eventually he too withheld tribute, and nearly a decade after the first invasion, Nebuchadnezzar's armies invaded Judah again. This attack was devastating. Babylon incapacitated outlying towns and blockaded Jerusalem. When the city tried to defend itself, it held off the army for nearly two years, but food supplies dwindled, famine and disease spread, and help from Egypt never came.

In 587 the Babylonian army broke through the walls of the weakened city, razed the palace and the Temple, and deported more Judean leaders to Babylon. King Zedekiah tried to escape with his sons, but Nebuchadnezzar captured them and executed the sons before the king's eyes; then they blinded him (Jer 52:7-11). The nation's leadership was destroyed along with the infrastructure, economy, and daily life in the city and its environs.

The Third Invasion

Babylonian efforts to stabilize the conquered land were not fully successful. They appointed a Judean official named Gedeliah as a kind of governor of the occupied people. He operated in a town called Mizpah in the northern region of Benjamin (Jer 40–41).¹³ But as often happens in imperial invasions, an insurgency arose. This one was led by a survivor of Judah's ruling family named Ishmael. He and his followers assassinated Gedeliah and slaughtered a large group of Judahites. To quell the uprising, Babylon invaded again in 582 B.C.E. and deported more people.

How Little We Know

In recent years, biblical historians have disputed nearly every aspect of this historical account. They do not agree about the number of people deported nor about how many remained in the land after the invasions. They quarrel over processes of Babylonian rule, the extent of destruction in Judah, and how bad it was for the survivors remaining in the land or in sent into exile. Because ancient sources of information about the period are sparse, there is broad scope for disagreement about this history. At the heart of the debate is the problem of the Bible's reliability as a source of history.

Why We Know So Little about the Times

Much of what we know about the history of Judah during the Babylonian Period comes from the Bible, but the Bible is not history in the modern scientific sense. It does not present objective, chronological reports of what happened. Rather than simply reporting what happened, biblical texts interpret events in light of God's engagement with the world. And because the texts speak to people who lived in the thick of the struggles in question, it was not necessary to report the historical conditions in which they lived and breathed. The audience of the biblical books needed interpretation and explanation, inspiration and hope. When the biblical texts do present memories of the past, they are already engaged in interpretation of events for the people trying to cope with them.¹⁴ The ancient authors show little interest in the pure facts for their own sake.

Complicating matters further, biblical texts often contradict each other and sometimes themselves, making it hard to know what occurred and when. The books of Kings, Chronicles, and Jeremiah, for example, report differing numbers and times of deportations, obscuring an accurate picture of the time.

Beside the Bible, we also have historical information gleaned from Babylonian records and from archeological study of material remains, but these bring their own problems of interpretation. The Babylonian Chronicles provide one example. These are royal inscriptions (writings) that record deeds of Babylonian kings.¹⁵ Because they were written by the king's scribes, they tend to "maximize" the rulers' achievements, skewing accounts to make their employers look good.¹⁶

Other archeological sources, such as the remains of material culture, are also limited in what they can show us. Material culture refers to physical remains of a society such as architecture, pottery, stamps, seals, or inscriptions on stone. These remains can show that destruction has taken place, but they often keep secrets about who did the destroying. The remains may show that a population lived in a place for a time, to be replaced later by people with different types of pottery, buildings, or writing. But estimates often are crude, and much uncertainty lingers.

Such limitations on the sources of information mean that, to uncover what happened, biblical historians must do what historians always do. They must weigh evidence, adjust for biases of their sources, and speculate about ancient happenings, their causes, and their consequences. Then, they draw conclusions humbly and provisionally.

How Bad Was It?

Despite many difficulties in reconstructing Judah's history during the Babylonian Period, most scholars agree that the nation experienced a major disaster, and much interpretation of the book of Jeremiah recognizes that the collapse of the nation brought with it unspeakable suffering. The invasions left major devastation in their wake, vastly interrupted ordinary life, and left the survival of the Judean people in serious doubt. Here is a brief survey of some of that destruction as biblical historians present it.

The Babylonian assaults drained away the population through deaths in battle, starvation, disease, deportation, and by the creation of internal refugees in the wake of warfare. And even if only a small number of Judean elite were dragged away to Babylon, the exile of political leaders, owners of land and businesses, judges and priests would have caused immense social and economic disruption.¹⁷ Other citizens who were not deported became internally dislocated, escaping to Benjamin in the north and scattering around the land. Even those who remained in the city of Jerusalem were probably displaced by the crumbling of life around them.¹⁸

Archeological excavations point to major physical destruction of towns and villages in the southern part of Judah. Life may have been easier in the northern region where there had been less destruction,¹⁹ but population increases there suggest that internal refugees from the south came into the area bringing other burdens.²⁰

It is uncertain whether Jerusalem itself was settled during the years after the invasions.²¹ Archeologist Lisbeth S. Fried believes that the land itself "lay desolate" because the destruction of the Temple and palace buildings would have affected badly the flourishing economic life upon which the wider society depended.²² And because both the Temple and palace were major symbols of relationship with God, their destruction called Judah's identity as God's people into serious question.

David Vanderhooft, who studies Babylonian history and archeology, confirms the picture of disastrously interrupted life in Judah under Babylonian rule. In his view, the Babylonians governed their occupied territories with practices as brutal and cruel as those of the notorious Assyrians before them.²³ They disrupted trade, stopped imports, destroyed the economy, and made "periodic

military appearances” to insure “the delivery of tribute.”²⁴ If these assessments are even partially accurate, the people of Judah underwent traumatic violence for decades.

Testimony to Disaster

Although biblical books associated with the Babylonian Period do not provide a systematic history of the times, they offer something better. They preserve stunning testimony that the people of Judah experienced an historic catastrophe. Testimony is speech from the inside of events;²⁵ it does not seek to prove something but to portray and interpret the experience from the inside.²⁶ The prophetic books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah, and the book of Lamentations testify in poetry and prose to the specter of life destroyed during this period.²⁷ The book of Ezekiel, for example, with its shocking imagery and “spaced-out” prophet, expresses the thoroughgoing traumas of the people deported to Babylon.²⁸

Similarly, the book of Jeremiah is run through with language of annihilation, lament, and struggle explicitly associated with Babylonian political and military realities. Second Isaiah later seeks to comfort the exiles in Babylon, a people battered, scattered, and broken. Finally, the book of Lamentations, also associated with the prophet Jeremiah, provides detailed complaints about life in the occupied land and ends on the brink of despair.²⁹

Life under Occupation

Lamentations’ five poems weep about the destroyed city, about the suffering of occupants young and old, and about the “eclipse of God.”³⁰ The last lament in the book presents life as a state of continuing terror (Lam 5).³¹ It decries the fate of the children, starving in the streets; tells of once ruddy and healthy nobles, now unrecognizable among the walking dead; and expresses shock that the most compassionate mother, desperate for food, cannibalizes her children. Under these conditions, the poem declares the dead to be better off than the living, for strangers occupy their homes and demand payment for water and food. Fathers have vanished, women are raped, and the youth stagger under the heavy burdens of forced labor (Lam 4–5). Lamentations concludes in bitter doubt of God’s intentions toward them:

Restore us to yourself, YHWH, and we will return,
renew our days as of old,
unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us forever (Lam 5:22, my translation).

Lamentations and the other literary works from the period offer poignant witness to the suffering, confusion, and despair that the catastrophe brought upon Judah. They testify that the Babylonian Period was disastrous for the nation and resulted in what Louis Stulman calls a “cosmic crumbling.”³² Although we do not know the exact historical details of the disaster, the biblical literature witnesses from within the continuing traumas to what the people of Judah underwent simply to stay alive.

Trauma and disaster studies can help us imagine further the profound displacements from which the book of Jeremiah emerges and show how the book searches for life in the overwhelming presence of death. They show that Jeremiah’s theology, for all its harsh bitterness, its prophecies of terror, and its weeping cries—even because of these things—is profoundly life-affirming. The book is a work of resilience, a moral act for the rebuilding of the community from the ashes of catastrophe. It is a kind of survival manual for victims of disaster and their offspring. These discoveries have opened up the book for me, something like discovering the secret spiritual life of an acquaintance one had known for years, never suspecting the depth that lay hidden there.