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# A Malleable Strength: The Formation of Jewish Identity in Response to Imperialism in Antiquity

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**A Malleable Strength:  
The Formation of Jewish Identity in Response to Imperialism in Antiquity**

By

Abigail Lynn Russell

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Chair, Dr. Steven Garfinkle

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## **Master's Thesis**

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Abigail Lynn Russell

May 24, 2017

**A Malleable Strength:  
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Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
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May, 2017

## **Abstract**

In this project I argue for a diachronic approach to Jewish identity that takes into account their experiences as imperial subjects under the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Seleucid Empires. By looking at how the Jews engaged with imperialism and identity as a process that spans these different imperial regimes, we can construct a clearer image of Jewish identity in antiquity.

I argue that Jewish identity must be examined as an ongoing process that was aided by literature and propelled by imperialism. Their identity as Jews was centered on one key idea: a separateness from others that was based in a Covenantal relationship with YHWH. As the Jews sought to maintain that separateness they renegotiated their identity as different threats arose with shifting imperial authority.

The Hebrew Bible is the end product of a long process of changes. It preserves centuries of history, prophecy, and poetry, all telling the story of a people and their God. But it is not a merely a record. These texts were intentionally created in response to their experiences as imperial subjects. By the second century BCE, these texts serve as the foundation of Jewish identity. Current historiography tends to address Jewish identity in the Hellenistic periods. However, their Jewish identity was threatened and shaped by imperialism long before the Hellenistic period.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.”<sup>1</sup> These were the last words of a young man who died steadfast in his faith. Following his brothers into death at the hands of a brutal king, he died confident that his death was not in vain and that giving up his life was justified. Why? He served the one and only God, and through his sacrifice the law of his ancestors was honored. In short, he was a Jew. Even facing death, this man claimed his identity and turned it against the murderous king. This nameless Jew and his brothers embodied the culmination of centuries of changes to Jewish identity and theology at the hands of empire. And just as this man accepted his own death, those changes were not inflicted upon as they remained helpless; the Jews were not just passive imperial subjects at the mercy of empire.

The story of Jewish identity in antiquity is one that begins at its end. Much of the Hebrew Bible had been written and was in circulation by the second century BCE making it contemporary with the ideas expressed by the young martyr and the socio-political realities he faced.<sup>2</sup> However, the construction of its individual parts was a process that took centuries of writing and rewriting making it the end product of a long process that reflects change over time. The Hebrew Bible was not just the text around

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Maccabees 7:37-38. The story of this young man and his brothers will be dealt with below in chapter four. The historicity of this story is tenuous; however, the story’s place in Jewish memory is seminal when discussing Jewish identity and active response to imperialism in antiquity.

<sup>2</sup> All scripture and apocryphal references will be taken from New Revised Standard edition unless otherwise noted. Michael David Coogan et. al. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha: an Ecumenical Study Bible*. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010).



which the Jews formed their identity; it was the result of the active creation of that identity.

This is a story that was impacted by the rise of imperialism in the ancient Near East, and by the subjugation of Jewish states to outside political authority. The relationship between imperialism and the ancient Jews was complex. Physical and institutional effects included deportation, the destruction of sacred spaces, and the disassembly of an autonomous political identity as the Jews went from being an independent monarchy to imperial subjects. This inquiry is an exploration of Jewish identity in active response to imperialism through their literature. I argue that Jewish literature produced just prior to and continuing through the Second Temple Period was actively and intentionally created to maintain a unique identity in the face of direct and indirect imperial forces.<sup>3</sup> Jewish identity was in continuous negotiation during this period and the terms of that negotiation changed as the imperial power changed forms.

As a whole, this paper will draw important connections between Jewish responses to Assyrian and Babylonian imperialism, Persian imperialism, and imperialism in the Hellenistic era. The attention paid to these shifts is where this work differs from previous works. I argue for a story that begins long before Hellenism and continues long after.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish people established their identity early on in their history as an independent people, in an independent, sacred space. Their experiences as imperial subjects threatened this independence causing the Jews to renegotiate their

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<sup>3</sup> The Second Temple Period is approximately 530 BCE to 70 CE. This project covers from approximately 700 BCE to 160 BCE. I begin with the Assyrian and the Babylonian periods discussing the years leading up to the destruction of the Temple and end with the Maccabean revolt.

<sup>4</sup> Shaye Cohen *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000).

identity to accommodate changing political climates. Ancient Jews had an ideological sense of who they were that was more deeply rooted than the established political or social structure allowing them to create and recreate an identity that could exist regardless of their political, social, or physical state. In other words, political autonomy was less significant than religious and ideological autonomy.

Identity, as defined by John J. Collins, “is a matter of knowing who one is, where one is coming from, and where one is going.”<sup>5</sup> For the Jews their identity came to be centered on their scriptural text. The use of literature to create a communal identity is a theoretical framework well known from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*.<sup>6</sup> For Anderson it was the rise of “print capitalism” that allowed members of a community to formulate social ties and develop a communal sense of nationalism.<sup>7</sup> His concept of a socially constructed nation is problematic when discussing ancient communities due to the absence of modern media or a prevalent print culture and the fact that ancient communities would not recognize the modern conceptualizations of nationhood. Anderson’s framework is still a solid foundation for understanding the use of literature to formulate a shared concept of self.

Rogers Smith further nuances Anderson’s framework by introducing the idea of stories to create conceptions of peoplehood, a more appropriate term than nations for the purpose of this project.<sup>8</sup> Literature allows individuals to perceive of themselves as part of a community by creating an imagined idea individuals can subscribe to and

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<sup>5</sup> Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*...6, 28, 36ff.

<sup>8</sup> Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

propagate. These communities are imagined because they exist primarily ideologically rather than physically. The creation and propagation of this communal identity is prominent throughout the Hebrew Bible. The communities Smith talks about are political because as a collective group they could become adversaries “of other forms of human association, *because* its proponents are generally understood to assert its obligations legitimately trump many of the demands made on its members in the name of other associations.”<sup>9</sup> This type of association leads members of communities to associate with each other more strongly than any other association they may be a part of.

Smith draws a much-needed distinction between statehood and peoplehood.<sup>10</sup> Peoplehood is better suited because these communities were not inherently bound by place or institution and the creation of these communities was primarily ideological. This definition of a political community provides a conceptual framework into which the ancient Jews fit fairly well. Jewish Law, the rules and religious customs Jews ascribe to, makes up the first five books of their scriptures and was the earliest segment of the Hebrew Bible to become canonized.<sup>11</sup> The Jews did not exist in a unified “state” for much of their history and yet they retained a reasonably unified identity that spanned both time and space.

Just like Anderson, Smith argues for the use of stories to create these peoplehoods. He identifies three basic types of stories that create these peoplehoods:

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> The actual process of canonization for the Hebrew Bible is uncertain and rarely agreed upon by scholars and theologians. It is generally accepted, however, that the Torah, the first five books, were in use as a collective text of some kind during the Persian period.

economic, political, and ethical. These stories work together to create the necessary senses of trust and worth that make these political communities possible.<sup>12</sup> The Jewish texts found in the Hebrew Bible follow Smith's characterization of ethical stories that preserve centuries of history, prophecy and poetry all telling the story of a people and their God.

The Jews clearly had a communal sense of identity even in diaspora and they used literature to help foster that identity. In the first century CE, Josephus, a Jew and a Roman citizen, wrote an entire history of the Jews with the intent to explain the nature of the Jewish people to their Greek and Roman peers. *Jewish Antiquities* is the history of the world from Josephus's Jewish perspective and is useful in examining how the Jews remembered their past and why. This work specifically is important as an attempt to explain the nature of the Jews to a non-Jewish world. Key to his explanation is the link between politics and religion. For Josephus, the Jews were a religious people first, and a political people second. Josephus considered the Jews separate from the rest of the world, something he felt the need to explain. He noted,

Now I have undertaken the present work, as thinking it will appear to all the Greeks worthy of their study; for it will contain all our antiquities, and the constitution of our government, as interpreted out of the Hebrew Scriptures. And indeed I did formerly intend, when I wrote of the war, to explain who the Jews originally were, - what fortunes they had been subject to, - and by what legislature they had been instructed in piety, and the exercise of other virtues... Now when Moses was desirous to teach this lesson to his countrymen, he did not begin the establishment of his laws after the same manner that other legislators did; I mean, upon contracts and other rights between one man and another, but by raising their minds upwards to regard God, and his creation of the world; and by persuading them, that we men are the most excellent of the creatures of God upon earth... but as for our legislator, when he had once demonstrated that God was possessed of perfect virtue, he supposed that

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 59-60.

men also ought to strive after the participation of it;<sup>13</sup>

Josephus acknowledged the Jewish people as somehow different from the rest due to their direct relationship with YHWH, and a law that reinforced that relationship. He considered the Jewish people as politically organized around a primarily religious text. This Law served as the distinguishing feature between the Jews and everyone else. It gained this significance as other markers of separation were dismantled, such as the Promised Land.<sup>14</sup> Josephus' insights here should be applied to the study of the Hebrew Bible as a whole. As he said, it was a religious text that served as the foundation of their ideology and their society and was created with a specific intent.

Just as our analysis of Jewish identity begins at the end and works backwards, so did the formation of these ideas in the first place. Thus, the Hebrew Bible and texts such as the Maccabees serve as both the starting point and the end product in an inquiry about Jewish identity. As a singular text, the Hebrew Bible offers a picture of Jewish identity contemporary with the second century BCE that served as the foundation of Jewish ideology thereafter. However, this text did not suddenly appear, nor did the ideas it conveys. The Hebrew Bible was written over the course of centuries and was intentionally crafted in different socio-political circumstances to preserve the Jewish idea of separateness even in the face of imperialism.

Examining Jewish identity in a diachronic context restores agency in the formation of their own identity in a way that has been neglected in previous scholarship. Jewish identity was changed and developed as they interacted with

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<sup>13</sup>Josephus Flavius, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (George Routledge & Sons, Limited, 1900), 1.1.18, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0146#note1>

<sup>14</sup> The Jewish perception of their separateness is expanded upon below in the section titled "Establishing Jewish Identity."

imperial powers but it had its foundation in something that preceded and transcended those interactions. Changes made to their identity follow a pattern of change across imperial regimes that stem from an identity already formed long before the completion of the Hebrew Bible. The significance of literature in the formation of Jewish identity is something that has long been recognized and discussed in scholarship. However, what I hope to highlight in this project is the necessity of looking at that literature across an extended period of time and in different historical contexts, particularly as the Jews interacted with imperial authority. In doing so I hope to demonstrate that the Jews were not passive subjects of imperial power but rather actively engaged in creating a past and a shared sense of identity that they were able to maintain even when threatened. The Hebrew Bible and Jewish identity by the second century BCE was the culmination of these changes and the foundation of them. As such it is prudent to establish Jewish identity as accepted in the second century BCE in order to more easily recognize the shifts throughout the text.

### **Establishing Jewish Identity**

By the second century BCE, Jewish identity was defined by one underlying idea: separateness.<sup>15</sup> The Jews defined their separateness on religious terms. For the Jews, being separate from the rest of the Mediterranean world meant to be chosen by YHWH to maintain cultural and religious distinctions, and to claim a specific geographic location as granted by YHWH. There were five elements that sustain this separateness: the Covenant, the Promised Land, the Law, the exclusive worship of YHWH, and the

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<sup>15</sup> I should note here that I am not arguing that Jewish identity did not change after the second century BCE. Here I am merely emphasizing the fact that the Hebrew Bible and books such as the Maccabees are “end products” coming after a long process of manipulation.

Temple.<sup>16</sup> These tenets threaded throughout Jewish literature serve as a baseline of sorts for examining how the Jews manipulated their identity and religion in response to imperial power and changing social and political circumstances.

The Covenant was established between YHWH and the Jewish people through a celebrated ancestry.<sup>17</sup> Abraham in the Jewish tradition is significant for the Covenant God established between himself and Abraham's seed. Genesis 12, 15, and 17 record the Covenant where God promises Abraham protection, reward, and an heir. Chapter 17 says,

I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my Covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my Covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my Covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting Covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.<sup>18</sup>

This Covenant made a couple of key statements and promises. First, it changed Abraham's name from exalted father to father of many nations. Essentially this was a promise of success, a continued legacy, and more importantly continued favor with

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<sup>16</sup> The five tenets I have parsed out here are not particularly novel. All five of these tenets are commonly addressed but usually in groups of three or four. I have chosen to use these five markers of identity because all five play a prominent role in how the Jews developed their identity in the face of imperialism. To limit the number any further would result in an incomplete analysis and the missing of vital details.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 32:22-32 The Jewish connection to their forefathers is reflected in repeated reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Throughout the Hebrew Bible this trio is considered to be the foundation upon which Israel was built –Jacob's name having been changed to Israel and being the father of God's people.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 17:1-8

God.<sup>19</sup> This Covenant also held a promise of a geographically defined space to belong to his people, the Promised Land.

This Covenant between Abraham and YHWH was a marker of a special relationship between man and deity that is in and of itself distinctive.<sup>20</sup> Exodus 20:19-23:33 contains the Covenant code, or the lawful conditions of the Covenant given to Moses after he led the Jews out of Egypt. The Law was further recorded in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.<sup>21</sup> This Law contains some of the telltale markers of what separated a Jew from the rest of the world i.e. circumcision, specific food laws, and Yahwism, or the exclusive worship of YHWH.

To “have no other gods besides me” was the first commandment given to Moses.<sup>22</sup> The exclusive worship of YHWH was a part of ancient Judaism that was not always realized in actuality. According to biblical sources, time and time again the Jewish people turned to worshipping other gods and suffering the consequences, namely delayed entry into the Promised Land and ultimately their exile from it.<sup>23</sup> However, the idea of exclusive worship is key to what made them separate from the rest of the

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<sup>19</sup> The promise is repeated to Abraham’s son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob, in Genesis 26:3-5 and Genesis 28:13 respectively.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 12, 15, and 17 record three different accounts of the Covenant.

<sup>21</sup> The law is expanded upon significantly in redacted forms in Leviticus and Deuteronomy as well. Deuteronomy is of special interest as it is latest version of the law most likely redacted after Josiah’s reforms in the late seventh century. For more on the dating of the law codes see Ernst Axel Knauf, “Observations on Judah’s Social and Economic History and the Dating of the Laws in Deuteronomy,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* (2009). 4; Roger S. Nam. *Portrayals of Economic Exchange in the Book of Kings* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Exodus 20:3.

<sup>23</sup> The Book of Hosea is an example of a prophetic book recounting and prophesying destruction for Israel if they continue to turn away from God and worship other deities. The language here is of whoredom and adultery, considering the act of turning to other gods as being comparable with being unfaithful in a marriage. The book begins with an allegorical story of Hosea, the prophet, being commanded by God to marry a prostitute who continually tries to return to her own ways, rejecting Hosea and blind to God’s provision. The rest of the book tells the cyclical tales of Israel time and time again turning from God and his law and suffering the consequences, likening Israel to the prostitute. Hosea 2:14-23 is the promise of God to restore relationship with his people using wedding imagery.



Mediterranean world. Being chosen by YHWH and the exclusive worship of one deity was unique in a mostly polytheistic world.

The eventual settlement in the Promised Land allowed the final of the five tenets, the Temple, to be established. According to the Hebrew Bible, King Solomon built the Temple in the mid-tenth century BCE.<sup>24</sup> The Temple housed the Ark of the Covenant and was the dwelling place of YHWH. As Solomon built the Temple,

the word of the Lord came to Solomon ‘With regard to the house you are building—if you follow My laws, and observe My rules, and faithfully keep My commandments, I will fulfill for you the promise that I gave to your father David: I will abide among the children of Israel, and I will never forsake My people Israel.’<sup>25</sup>

Upon the completion of the Temple, Solomon dedicated it to the Lord before the entire population. At the end of his dedication, Solomon evoked the separateness of which this Temple was a symbol saying, “For You oh LORD God, have set them apart for Yourself from all the peoples of the earth as your very own, as You promised through Moses Your servant when You freed our fathers from Egypt.”<sup>26</sup> Evoking the Exodus from Egypt was recalling a time in their historical memory when the Jews were displaced and yet still considered themselves separate.<sup>27</sup> The Temple was a symbol of the end of that displacement.

In some ways the Temple was the crux of Jewish identity bringing together the four other tenets. Dedicated to YHWH, it was the physical and final commitment to

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<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the historical details the Temple’s existence is an undisputed part of Jewish identity.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Kings 6:11-13

<sup>26</sup> 1 Kings 8:53

<sup>27</sup> The Exodus from Egypt and the time spent wandering in the desert is a common motif in both the Law and other diasporic literature: literature written by Jews residing outside the Promised Land. This genre of literature understandably is saturated with the questions of why they were to be punished in such a way. To be forced from the Temple and the Holy Land was to be removed from their God.

having no other God, thus fulfilling the first commandment of the Law. It was the dwelling place of God and His presence was assured, provided the Jews followed the Law He had given them. Housing the Ark of the Covenant, the physical reminder of the Covenant made with the forefathers, it was a sacred space. The entry into the Promised Land was what made the building of the Temple possible. It helped establish a God-idea that was attached to the land itself, making both the Temple and the Promised Land vital to their identity.<sup>28</sup> The command to be built was given to David, the Father of Israel, an extension of the Patriarchal identity that consisted of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Temple was the dwelling place for YHWH to remain with His people and the Promised Land made it possible tying them exclusively to YHWH in a physical way. The Law kept them in right relation to YHWH in accordance with the Covenant and the forefathers established a historical tradition of being blessed by God.

The foregoing definition of Jewish identity is one constructed from texts produced far after the events and developments they convey. The Hebrew Bible is a source book, among other things, that offers snapshots of Jewish identity at different periods in their history. These texts reveal an actively changing identity intentionally composed in response to various imperial powers. Their identity, formed initially on the basis of being separate from the rest of the ancient Near East in a physical sense, was threatened and ultimately destroyed by the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires when their Temple was destroyed and the Jews were forced from the Promised Land. This instigated the need to adapt their identity to retain their separateness despite a

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<sup>28</sup> The term God-idea refers to the ways in which the Jews perceived of YHWH in relation to themselves, other deities, and the world around them. The term is used to sum up the set of beliefs about God that characterized the Jewish community at different stages of their history in antiquity.

diasporic existence and even embrace their displaced nature.

Erich Gruen stated that the wandering or displaced Jew has been part of Jewish identity since Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden.<sup>29</sup> The very nature of the wandering Jew is one separated from their intended place and their God. The Covenant established with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob created a common identity for Jews, even displaced ones. Statements in the Law are often justified with the reminder that they were brought out of the land of Egypt by God and were foreigners while there.<sup>30</sup> These two repeated statements serve as reminders of their status under God and in a foreign land forming a core aspect of their identity by creating a common association with a shared past.

### **An Introduction to the Historiography**

Many discussions of Jews and imperialism focus on short periods and often on a singular imperial power. They tend to center their discussions of Jews and imperialism in the Hellenistic and eras neglecting the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian periods. Erich Gruen's book, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans*, argued that the Jewish response to Greek and Roman influence was more complex than simple rejection or acceptance of imperial authority and gentile culture. This book examined the Jews beginning with the Ptolemies and ending in approximately 70 CE and argued that the Jews were successful in maintaining a Jewish identity without alienating themselves from their non-Jewish surroundings. In his preface Gruen focused his work on the 400-year span from Alexander the Great to Nero "in which Jews dwelled in the diaspora—

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<sup>29</sup> Erich Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009),1.

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 20:1; Deuteronomy 10:12-22.

before any threat to the Temple materialized. They evidently preferred it there.”<sup>31</sup> One of the issues with Gruen’s work is a disregard for the destruction of the Temple in the sixth century BCE. This implies a perception of their own history that does not extend prior to Hellenism.

Lester Grabbe provided a notable movement in the right direction with his work, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*. In his own words this two volume work was meant to serve as a “handbook” and a “handy reference.”<sup>32</sup> His book was a comprehensive guide to Second Temple literature and Grabbe gracefully did not shy away from what he does not know or what we cannot understand about the Jews in antiquity. As a work that presented the existing literature in an expository manner rather than with historical analysis, Grabbe offered a starting point. Rather than attempt to construct what really happened from what was written, Grabbe simply presented the literature on its own terms. He offered some explanation and minimal interpretation but openly engaged opposing viewpoints without arguing for one or the other. *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* successfully established Second Temple Judaism as something more than just a discussion of the Hellenistic and the Roman periods.

The second major vein of historiography that this paper engages is that of imperialism in general. *Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, edited by Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, as the name suggests, traced imperial power from the Assyrians to Byzantium. With essays covering five different major empires, the authors argued that the “dynamics of empires requires us to grapple

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<sup>31</sup> Gruen, *Diaspora*, vii.

<sup>32</sup> Lester Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), xxv.

with the tensions among the political/military, economic, and ideological/religious structures and elites that together constitute imperial power systems.”<sup>33</sup> They attempted to provide an analysis of empire that highlights change in form over time, with each essay addressing a different imperial power. This work was instrumental to understanding how one empire adopts or destroys the practices and ideologies of the previous one.

Seth Schwartz brought the discussion of imperialism into direct relation to the Jews. Schwartz’s treatment of Judaism and imperialism was primarily historical but succeeds in establishing that literature was not created separately from history.

However, he focused primarily on the context of the literature, rather than the literature itself.<sup>34</sup> He emphasized the institutional developments of Jewish society and argued that a

loosely centralized, ideologically complex society came into existence by the second century B.C.E, collapsed in the wake of the destruction and the imposition of direct Roman rule after 70 C.E., and reformed starting in the fourth century, centered now on the synagogue and the local religious community, in part as a response to the Christianization of the Roman Empire.<sup>35</sup>

While Schwartz’s analysis did not completely disregard the ideological foundation of this complex society, he neglected to pay any substantial attention the role of literature and religious texts in the formation of this identity. He was primarily concerned with the structural results of imperialism rather than the ideological foundations of the

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<sup>33</sup>Jack Goldstone and John Haldon, “Ancient States, Empires, and Exploitation Problems and Perspectives,” *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*, ed. Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>34</sup> Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E to 640 C.E.* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 1.

structural formations.

The literary vein of scholarship is well represented in another work by Erich Gruen titled *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Identity*. Gruen focused his analysis specifically on the literary strategies of the Jews in the Hellenistic period. In this way he filled the gap left by Schwartz. Gruen argued that the convergence of two cultures, equally adherent to their ancient heritage, resulted in a period of redefinition for the Jews.<sup>36</sup> Gruen successfully called attention to one very important fact about the sources produced during this period: they were imaginative, and they used scripture and history as the foundation for other works as the Jews constructed a literary image of themselves. The creative nature of these sources, he argued, was true for both Diasporic Jews and Palestinian Jews as, “the development transcends a Diaspora mentality.”<sup>37</sup> Gruen paid little to no attention to the institutional side of the Jewish societies. Taken together, Schwartz and Gruen help create an ideological and an institutional image of the Jews. However, while both deal with empire as a force that exists, there is little inquiry into the relationship between the Jews and imperial power in antiquity.

Anathea Portier-Young stepped in to fill that gap by looking at Jewish literature as a direct response to imperialism. In a work entitled *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism*, she argued for a close reading of apocalyptic literature as a resistance to empire. Portier-Young brought the literature that the Jews produced to an equal level of importance as physical acts such as the Maccabean revolts

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<sup>36</sup> Erich Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish tradition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 292.

and the Roman Jewish Wars.<sup>38</sup> Her work was similar to Schwartz' in that she looked at the relationship between Judaism and empire, but she focused on literature as a response rather than economic, political, or structural formations as a result of that relationship. Like Schwartz, she recognized that literature is not produced detached from history. But unlike Schwartz her analysis is rooted in the significance of the literature itself as a unique and important component of the Jewish response to imperialism rather than just evidence of a reaction. She argued that in the face of social, political, and military threats and pressures,

The temple and ancestral laws occupy a complex position: authorized by the empire, they are also primary sites of meditation between the Jewish people and the God they recognize as ultimate sovereign. As such, they have the potential to both unify and divide the people of Judea. Some would find in the Jerusalem temple and the ancestral laws avenues to greater participation in the imperial power structure. Others would ultimately perceive a conflict of sovereignties, and fight to wrest both away from imperial control. While both temple and ancestral laws would continue to bear the stamp of the colonizing powers, they were vital resources not only for 'self-governance' but also for self-definition in relation to the ruling powers.<sup>39</sup>

Portier-Young's analysis of ideological responses to imperial hegemony is well argued and compelling. However, despite being a study of "early Judaism," Portier-Young neglected Jewish identity prior to the Seleucid Empire. While she did exceptionally well in analyzing literature and response her work still reflects a trend in the historiography of Judaism, identity, and imperialism: the emphasis on the Hellenistic and Roman eras at the exclusion of previous periods.

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<sup>38</sup> Anthea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 2011). In doing so, Portier Young bases her analysis on Gramsci's theory of Hegemony.

<sup>39</sup> Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 73.

The problem exhibited by this historiography is an analytical disconnect between eras. The preference for the Hellenistic and Roman periods as being more crucial and influential than the Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian periods creates an incomplete picture of the formation of Jewish identity. By the Hellenistic period Jewish identity had been intentionally crafted in response to changing imperial power for centuries and should be examined as such. The Jewish response to imperialism was largely preservative before it was resistive. By the Hellenistic period the Jewish response to imperialism became more physical and subversive, creating a noticeable shift. But this shift was not the beginning, it was part of a long process of negotiating identity that had begun centuries before and would continue past it.

The following project will be divided into three chapters each one addressing a different imperial period and the literary constructions of Jewish peoplehood framed in response to those shifting imperial authorities. The diachronic approach in this analysis is intentional to show the existence of a “peoplehood” even prior to the Hellenistic age. In the next chapter I will address the Assyrian and the Babylonian periods. My focus will be on the reforms undertaken by king Josiah in the seventh century BCE during the waning days of Assyrian imperialism. King Josiah initiated a number of social, religious, and political reforms that helped create a usable past for the kingdom of Judah in an attempt to centralize power. Particularly, he reinvigorated the Law to focus worship on the Temple in Jerusalem and away from the northern kingdom of Israel creating a Judah-centric version of their history. Additionally, this period saw the redaction of the Law in the book of Deuteronomy and the development of a God-idea to accommodate imperial pressures under the Assyrians and Babylonians. The destruction of their



Temple and deportation led to forging an identity where the existence of a physical space was no longer essential to their identity. The celebration of the Exodus as mentioned above becomes key as the identity of the wandering Jew allowed them to exist without a physical space while still maintaining ties to it through memory and prophecies of its restoration.

Chapter three examines how this renegotiated identity was affected in a time characterized by a good relationship with the imperial power. The Persian king Cyrus presented the Jews with the opportunity to restore the Temple and return to the Promised Land. However, not all decided to return. This chapter explores the question of how the Jews justified their choice to stay in exile, responding to imperial benevolence rather than explicit threat. Persian imperialism, and Cyrus specifically accommodated Jewish ideology in a way that Assyrians and Babylonians did not. It is during this period that Jewish identity had to accommodate both those in Jerusalem and those in diaspora, making Smith's distinction between nationhood and peoplehood even more significant. It also had to accommodate an accepted foreign king. Once again, the Jews turned to their law, their ancestry, their prophecy and most significantly their God-idea to accommodate this new imperial authority. After their returned to Jerusalem in the mid sixth century BCE, Ezra enacted the first public reading of the Torah, the literary encapsulation of their identity and instigated a number of social and religious reforms not unlike Josiah's during the Assyrian period. In diaspora, Jewish identity was reconstructed and maintained via stories such as Esther and Ruth that highlighted the acceptance of foreigners into Jewish communities and the emphasis on YHWH and the Law over residence in the Promised land or proximity to the Temple. Further

redactions and edits aided in the reconstruction of an identity that maintained continuity with previous developments but was suitable for the current political and social climate under Persian Imperialism.

Chapter four argues that by the time the Jews faced the Seleucid Empire their identity had been formed in such a way that made their resistance to imperialism both possible and necessary. Though ideological preservation of identity had precedence, physical resistance in the way it manifested under Antiochus IV was a new development. During the Hellenistic Era, physical resistance arose out of internal conflict and resulted in the formation of specific ideologies that characterized new key tenets of Jewish identity. The increase in devotion to the Temple and ancestral Law was the result of the need to maintain a solid grounding for their identity as Jews. As internal division grew to civil conflict, imperial power became involved leading to physical resistance with strong ideological foundations. Examining this period of history in relationship to previous periods of imperialism is vital to understanding the ideological transformation in which the Jews engaged. Jewish ideas expressed in the literature and the works themselves transitioned from being an internal renegotiation of identity to being resistive. It was this shift that warrants a view of Jewish identity that spans the periods prior to the Seleucids. This is no doubt a seminal moment that put into motion significant developments, but it was not the first. This revolutionary moment had its foundation in centuries of response prior to this moment.

This project spans Jewish history from the eighth century BCE to the first century CE. The sources for this study cover not only the same length of time but find their origins across the Mediterranean written in a variety of languages, covering a

variety of topics, and representing several different genres. The Jews spent considerable time in antiquity renegotiating their past. Precise dating was not a concern for the Jews, neither was language or genre. In fact, it was in this fluidity that a large part of their identity was formed. The parameters of this paper are thus, equally as fluid. In order to establish Jewish identity, or more accurately the changes made to that identity, it is absolutely vital to look at them on their own terms.

The Jewish texts used in this project are heavily drawn from the Hebrew Bible. Though this is not an exegetical paper, Jewish identity is heavily grounded in their religious identity necessitating a close reading of their religious texts and attention to their religious ideologies. This canonical source offers a collection of texts that represent historical, literary, and religious documents from different periods of Jewish history. As a canonical collection of stories, religious teaching, and historical memory, the Torah is a key element to establishing a collective idea of how the Jews viewed themselves. It is the first portion of the Hebrew Bible containing its early historical texts and the Jewish Law code. Its nature as a religious text is significant for several reasons, not least of which is that it emphasizes the significance of religion over politics in every aspect of how the Jews remembered themselves. In addition to the Torah the Hebrew Bible contains other literary works. Historical books such as First and Second Kings offer represents a version of Jewish history that was influenced by imperialism and explained with Jewish religious ideology. Similarly, books such as Esther and Ruth are pseudo historical works with religious implications.

Some of the most valuable non-biblical texts are the Elephantine Papyri from the island of Elephantine in Upper Egypt from the fifth century BCE. These texts, as Bezalel

Porten says, are invaluable because, “They provide the earliest documentation for the political, economic, social, religious, and corporate life of a Jewish community—and a Diaspora one at that.”<sup>40</sup> These Papyri are from three separate archives and contain mostly letters and records. Many are legal or business related and some are between family members.

The ancient Jewish sources addressed in this work have their origins in different eras spanning approximately seven centuries. Additionally, the political climate, social circumstance, and even physical location of the authors of these texts are varied. Time and space pose a problem to assuming a singular and uniform identity. Identity in the context of this paper then refers specifically to the ways in which the Jews chose to remember themselves through literature. It is assumed that Jews across the Mediterranean would not see themselves in a completely homogeneous sense, under one identity, and that many factors would play into that diversity. The goal of this project then is not to establish one solid or definable Jewish identity, but rather to understand the ways in which the Jews actively modified their identity to internally negotiate changing political and social realities as a result of different imperial regimes.

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<sup>40</sup> Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), viii.

## Chapter 2: Retroactive Restoration

Interactions with empire prior to exile instigated the production of literature aimed at creating retroactive continuity: a means of creating a history that is shaped by the present and the future rather than a future that is dictated by the past.<sup>41</sup> Retroactive continuity was not unique to the Jews. Assyrian and Babylonian king lists, for example, served essentially the same purpose.<sup>42</sup> However, I would argue that the Jewish texts that take on this task were different in many ways. Their genre and their content sought to establish a different sense of the past than other texts. Other ancient king lists sought to establish authority of one king due to his ancestry.<sup>43</sup> The Jewish texts were far more expansive and focused on establishing their history and their identity in response to imperial authority. Additionally, these reconstructions of the past had a future element that texts like king lists do not exhibit as clearly. For the Jews, writing a history was about more than the reign of that specific Jewish king. It was about the whole of the Jewish people.

In this chapter I argue that the texts the Jews produced during and after their time as Assyrian and Babylonian subjects were intentionally crafted to create and maintain an identity in a way that could function when political and social cohesion was elusive. This is especially true following the Babylonian Exile. The Jews retroactively restored their history to accommodate a present that threatened their identity and used

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<sup>41</sup> Retroactive continuity is a term that has its origins in the 1970s. It refers to the practice in popular literature of retroactively creating a different story arc in order to enable future developments. An example would be that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle retroactively claimed that Sherlock's death was staged in order to continue the story line. It is commonly used in comics and other serial literary productions.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian chronicles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Francis Johannès, *The Age of empires: Mesopotamia in the First Millennium BC.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 12.

prophecy to create a future that maintained continuity. Written mostly in the aftermath of the exile, these texts all attempted to explain, from a predominantly religious perspective, why the exile happened and what the future might look like. Importantly, these texts sought to establish a Jewish identity that was still complete despite a diasporic existence and the loss of their Temple.

In the first part of this chapter I will discuss Assyrian and Babylonian ideology paying special attention to their use of religion to legitimize their reign and interact with their subjects. However, rather than be defeated, the Jews responded by retroactively restoring their identity and their history to accommodate the imperial authority. Josiah's response to foreign imperialism makes up the second half of this chapter. King Josiah, in the seventh century BCE enacted a number of social, political, and religious changes that actively responded to the imperial threat to their identity as a people. These reforms were concerned mostly with restoring and retaining a sense of identity that unified the people ideologically as they were coming under attack physically and politically. Most significantly, he restored the Law to a prominent place in social and religious life resulting in the book of Deuteronomy and a version of history that explained their present circumstances in accordance to their law. This version of history and the texts that follow in its pattern are the Deuteronomist texts and are the epitome of Smith's framework of stories that create peoplehood. Josiah's recreation of history is Judah centric accounting for the loss of the northern kingdom of Israel and unifying the people ideologically under his reign and more significantly, under YHWH. Along side the Law, Jewish texts of this time developed a God-idea of their own, elevating YHWH above the imperial gods.

The final section of this chapter addresses texts produced after the Babylonian Exile and the destruction of the Jewish Temple. The removal from the Promised Land and the loss of the Temple necessitated another way to retain separateness since living in a separate space was no longer possible. To accommodate, the Promised Land and the Temple became strong ideological concepts. The promise of a future restoration allowed these two markers of identity to retain their significance despite their physical loss. These prophecies also fit into the Deuteronomist history relying heavily on this newly reinvigorated Law and God-idea to help retroactively restore the Jewish people despite the loss of Land and Temple as well as independent social and political status.

### **Imperial Ideology and Practice**

The Neo-Assyrian Empire seems to have begun about 911 BCE and was a period of great expansion.<sup>44</sup> This expansion was a product of two developments: the culmination of tension with surrounding and threatening imperial powers such as the Babylonians and the Egyptians and the reconquest of territories that had previously been part of the Assyrian state. The expansion during the earlier two periods “was gradual, with much unevenness along the way and the manner in which Assyria controlled the various regions and peoples differed considerably from place to place and time to time.”<sup>45</sup> Administration of these conquered territories only began in a serious way in the ninth and eighth centuries. Expansion under the Neo-Assyrian

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<sup>44</sup> Assyrian History is divided by modern scholars into three broad periods: Old Assyria (c. 2000 BCE-c. 1800 BCE), Middle Assyria (c. 1400 BCE -c. 1100 BCE), and Neo-Assyria (c. 900 BCE- c. 600 BCE). For more on the nature of these divisions see Steven J. Garfinkle, *The Assyrians: a new look at an ancient power* (na, 2007), 58-61; Peter R. Bedford, “The Neo-Assyrian Empire,” *Dynamics of Ancient Empires : State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, ed. Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2009), 39-47.

<sup>45</sup>A. Kirk Grayson, "Assyrian Rule of Conquered Territory in Ancient Western Asia" *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* Vol 2 ed. J. M. Sasson (New York: Scribner's, 1995), 959.

Empire was initially the reconquest of territories considered to be part of the Assyrian Empire during the Middle Assyrian Period. Ashurnasirpal II embarked on a mission of mass expansion and initiated mass deportations that increased in scale with his son Shalmanassar III.<sup>46</sup>

Peter Bedford pointed out that, "From the Assyrian perspective, this [expansion] might be considered not a new act of imperialism but rather the re-establishment of control over territories in rebellion against their long-standing overlord."<sup>47</sup> This practice of reconquest aids in understanding the desire for expansion. This contributed to the brutal ideology so characteristic of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. When faced with the Assyrians, the Jews not only had to respond physically in terms of warfare, but also to their conquerors imperial ideology. Assyrian conquest was accompanied with explicit proclamations and tactics of warfare that hinged on rhetoric and psychological manipulation as much as they did on actual conquest. Assyrian imperial ideology is important to dissect because it formed the foundation for much of the response by the Jewish people and informed both Assyrian and Jewish literature.

The orientation of Assyrian and Babylonian society around the patron deity was the quality to which much of the Jewish literature responded. In warfare, the Assyrians evoked their gods and used rhetorical strategies prior to actual battle. Psychological warfare was not unique to the Assyrians, but the Assyrians were masters of it. Assyrians would brutally destroy both the living and the remains of the dead in a public

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<sup>46</sup> Simo Parpola, "National and Ethnic Identity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Identity in Post-Empire Times," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, Vol. 18, no. 2, (2004), 8.

<sup>47</sup> Bedford, "The Neo-Assyrian Empire," 52.



manner after a victory, instilling fear into surrounding areas.<sup>48</sup> In royal inscriptions from various Assyrian kings, descriptions are particularly detailed with boasting not just of victory but of a special type of brutality. From the annals of Ashurnasirpal II, we read:

In strife and conflict I besieged and conquered the city.... I burnt many captives, from them. I captures many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms (and) hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, (and) extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living (and) one of the heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city. I burnt their adolescent boys (and) girls. I razed, destroyed, burnt, (and) consumed the city.<sup>49</sup>

This psychological warfare was as concerned with inciting terror and setting up power through brutal displays almost more than it is with actual battle. On top of gaining a psychological “upper hand” in battle, one key goal of this type of warfare was to squash rebellion before it even began.

In an inscription from Nineveh, Sennacherib speaks of several conquests including that of Jerusalem in 701 BC. He claims,

As for him (Hezekiah), I confined him inside the city Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage. I set up blockades against him and made him dread exiting his city gate...fear of my lordly brilliance overwhelmed him,...[and] he sent a mounted messenger of his to me to deliver (this) payment and to do obeisance.<sup>50</sup>

Following the siege, Hezekiah was overwhelmed and paid the demanded tribute. In this account, not uncommon in Assyrian inscriptions, the brutality inflicted upon the people both during battle and after was an act of terror specifically designed to intimidate and

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<sup>48</sup> Grayson, “Assyrian rule...,” 961.

<sup>49</sup>A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC*. Vol. 2. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 201.

<sup>50</sup>A. Kirk Grayson and Jamie Novotny, “Sennacherib 004” in the Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period (RINAP) Project, (2012), 52. <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/rinap3/Q003478/html>.

manipulate. Siege warfare accompanied by public torture, taunting speeches, and other acts of terror were inflicted not just to win battles, but also to enforce subservience by means of fear. The siege of Jerusalem, from the Assyrian perspective, was an ordinary defeat of an ordinary kingdom. Contrasting the Assyrian account with the Jewish account, however, creates an opportunity to evaluate the event not just as a historical event, but also as an ideological one with lasting implications on the Jews beyond physical defeat.

Of course it should be noted that the contemporary Assyrian sources should not be taken verbatim as accurate recounts of events. The inscriptions served as propaganda justifying the actions of the kings as well as elevating the glory of Assyria. Comparing these inscriptions with biblical sources is a useful means of establishing the events from different perspectives. However, the contemporary Jewish sources should also be read with caution. The above inscription has its biblical counterpart in Second Kings 18-20. In the Assyrian account the physical aspects were the primary focus: the siege itself, the capture of men, the plunder, and the tribute. The biblical account differed somewhat primarily by the prominence of a speech, which was absent in the Assyrian inscription.

In the Biblical account of this siege a speech by Sennacherib was recorded directly attacking the core of Jewish identity, a tactic that may have been as productive as the actual physical siege.<sup>51</sup> Hezekiah pleaded for the Assyrian king to withdraw and offered to pay the tribute requested of him. He sent silver and gold and even “cut down the doors and the doorposts of the Temple of the LORD,” which had been covered in

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<sup>51</sup> The speech is delivered by the rab-shakeh, an Assyrian official supposedly quoting Sennacherib.

gold, in order to pay this tribute.<sup>52</sup> Sennacherib responded with a verbal attack on Hezekiah, Judah, and their God. He began by ridiculing their confidence and for making the assumption that he (Hezekiah) “must think that mere talk is counsel and valor for war.”<sup>53</sup> He then comments and scoffs at Judah’s reliance on Egypt for support, playing on the long standing rivalry of sorts between Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. These attacks were all intended to weaken Judah’s defenses, hopefully ensuring an Assyrian victory. This is not to suggest that the Jews were competing with the Assyrians in this psychological warfare. However, it is clear that there is an element to imperialism that is psychological that gave the Jews space to mount a psychological resistance.

Psychological warfare and brutality gained Assyria their infamy, but a less frequently touched on aspect of their imperial ideology was their religion and its relationship with their administration and conquest. There are many aspects of Assyrian religion worth study but we are concerned specifically with the concept of divine kingship and its effects on imperial action. The very language used to justify conquest “was often overtly theology.”<sup>54</sup> The concept of Divine Kingship is the ideological relationship between the earthly ruler and the god or gods of that particular city-state, kingdom, or empire. The principal god of Assyria was Assur. In their own texts, during times of war, Assur was often the one who either blessed the outcome, sent them to war in the first place, or was punishing them for some indiscretion by way of defeat by an enemy.

A key part of this relationship was specifically the divine appointment of the

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<sup>52</sup> 2 Kings 18:16.

<sup>53</sup> 2 Kings 18:9-37.

<sup>54</sup> S.W. Holloway *As's'ur is king! As's'ur is king! : Religion in the exercise of power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 74.

king and even the physical embodiment of the god by the king or at the very least a vice-regent. Ashurnasirpal's inscriptions describe him with god like imagery.

At that time my sovereignty, my dominion, (and) my power came forth at the command of the great gods; I am king, I am Lord, I am praiseworthy. I am exalted, I am important, I am magnificent, I am foremost, I am hero, I am a warrior, I am a lion, and I am virile; Ashurnasirpal, strong king, vice-regent of Assur;<sup>55</sup>

Ashurnasirpal is the direct actor for Assur with all the qualifications of a god.

Ashurnasirpal's association with Assur allowed freedom of action and granted him a certain level of legitimacy in his rule.

The important thing to note here is that religion and divine ideology were not the motivation for imperialism but the legitimization. The acts of the king may have been economically motivated but were justified in divine terms. "Traditionally," says Bedford, "the Assyrian king was a religious functionary; at least his title in the Old Assyrian period (early second millennium), "vicar of Ashur," marked him off as such."<sup>56</sup> In fact it was not until the Middle Assyrian period that the term king was seen in widespread use. Bedford projects that this was probably a result of the need for the king to assert himself as an equal among the other "Great Kings." Bedford states that, "This club of "Great Kings" in western Asia during the mid-second millennium recognized its members as political equals, as well as trading partners and potential competitors, and they called each other 'brother.'"<sup>57</sup>

For the Assyrians in the Middle Assyrian period, the elevation of gods as a

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<sup>55</sup> Grayson, *Assyrian rulers...* 239.

<sup>56</sup> Bedford, "The Neo Assyrian Empire," 59.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

means of establishing legitimate rule became a prevalent practice.<sup>58</sup> In the Neo-Assyrian period the Assyrians under king Sennacherib maintained an “aggressive policy” towards the Babylonians and “the growing pre-eminence of the god Assur at the expense of Marduk, the venerated patron deity of Babylon,” is directly related.<sup>59</sup> The divine command to expand and conquer created tension since imperial success was seen as a pious commitment to the power of the head of their pantheon; and this complicated the empire’s relationship with the gods of its subjects.

As the divinely appointed ruler, “A Great King,” and second only to Assur himself, client and vassal kings were expected to pay the appropriate tribute and respect and submission to the Assyrian king and Assur. Despite the divine nature of these political moves, the subjected people were not expected to submit to the cult of Assur, but rather simply to respect his earthly representative.<sup>60</sup> Acts against the king and rejection of his authority (perhaps in the form of refusal of tribute) were also acts of religious defiance and was treated as insubordination and responded to as rebellion. In other words, anti-Assyrian policies were by default anti-Assur, which legitimated an appropriate response from the king.<sup>61</sup> The Jews engaged in this kind of rebellion when King Hoshea sought gain independence.

Tiglath Pileser III put King Hoshea, the last king of the northern kingdom of

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<sup>58</sup> This Brotherhood has been determined through administrative and trade texts, and was a vital part of international relations. Diplomacy is perhaps the word that best describes the nature of this network of kings. Gifts were necessary as good will sentiments and promotion to brother rather than son was something to be sought. But along with diplomacy was an element of competition. As part of a network or community of Great Kings all of whom serve the Great god, elements of competition and the need to assert oneself as higher than the rest is not unexpected.

<sup>59</sup> Baruch Levine, “Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism,” *Iraq* 67, no. 1 (2005), 413.

<sup>60</sup> Holloway, *As's'ur is king! As's'ur is king!*, 74; Mordechai Cogan, “Judah under Assyrian Hegemony: A Reexamination of Imperialism and Religion,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 3 (1993), 403-14.

<sup>61</sup> Bedford, “The Neo Assyrian Empire,”

Israel on the throne, but once Shalmaneser took the Assyrian throne, Hoshea sought Israel's independence with the aid of Egypt. Assyria responded by capturing the capital city of Samaria and deporting the Israelites.<sup>62</sup> According to Israel Finkelstein, only about one fifth of the Israelite population was actually deported.<sup>63</sup> These were primarily what one might call high profile individuals: the elites, artisans, craftsmen, perhaps some soldiers, and of course the trouble makers. In addition, people from other states were brought into the remnants of the northern kingdom of Israel, successfully integrating Israel into the Assyrian empire.

### **A Restoration of Identity**

During this era, even when a Jewish monarch retained his crown as an Assyrian vassal, tribute had to be paid and loyalty belonged to one imperial power or the other. Imperial expansion meant a constantly changing political climate. Judean loyalty and political status under the Assyrians was rather unstable as, "Judah had maintained complex and often hostile relations with Assyrian and Babylonian powers, frequently attempting to maintain a dangerous policy of swinging allegiance between Egypt and Babylonia."<sup>64</sup> In 609 BCE, Judah came under the control of Egypt and,

at the same time, the ruin of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the appearance of the Neo-Babylonian kingdom placed the Judahite leaders in an uncomfortable situation: they had to choose between Egypt and Babylonia, without in reality having the means of exerting any influence in the struggle between the two powers."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> 2 Kings 17.

<sup>63</sup> Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman. *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Sacred Texts* (Simon and Schuster, 2002), 221.

<sup>64</sup> Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: The history of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 45.

<sup>65</sup> Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 45; Bedford, "The Neo Assyrian Empire," 42-72; Obed Lipschitz, *Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Jerusalem under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 1-2.

Nevertheless, rather than passively accept a new reality, the Jews actively worked to restore their identity and respond to imperial authority. The literature produced during this time shows several theological developments that aided in maintaining a Jewish identity that was distinctive and separate despite living under the thumb of a foreign ruler and in diaspora. Some of the challenges were direct, such as deportation and the destruction of the Temple. Each elicited a response from the Jews that effectively strengthened their identity even when certain aspects of it faced destruction.

The first development in Jewish identity is evident in retroactive continuity. This was the rewriting of history and even religious texts to create a usable past and make sense of the present. The Jews created a version of their past in which their subjection to imperial authority was a result of disobedience to God. By assigning this to their past, they succeeded not only in maintaining their separateness, but they also reasserted their Law. First and Second Kings and Chronicles were a chronological evaluation of the kings of Israel and Judah on religious criteria: that is to say the kings were evaluated based on their adherence to the Law.<sup>66</sup> As discussed earlier, adherence to the Law was the condition of the Covenant established between YHWH and His people. Prior to the monarchic period, failure to adhere to the law resulted in delayed entrance into of the Promised Land. In this era, the repercussions were similar.<sup>67</sup>

Throughout the Assyrian and Babylonian periods Israel and Judah experienced

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<sup>66</sup> As per the discussion in the introduction, the Law was the people's part of the Covenant with YHWH. To adhere to the Law was to retain favor with God. Thus the status of the entire community was reflective of the king's ability to maintain the Law.

<sup>67</sup> The stories generated by their histories are the ethically constitutive stories that Smith identifies. They not only reflect a history but they created a history at an intentional moment.

an ebb and flow of finding themselves in the favor of God or the wrath of God.<sup>68</sup> This undulating relationship finally reaches the point of no return with Manasseh the king of Judah. His reign is considered the worst of the kings in historical works such as Second Kings. The Biblical text makes little mention of his political accomplishments. According to the Biblical texts, Manasseh “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel,” he defiled the Temple with images of idols, and misled “Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that they did more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed before the people of Israel.”<sup>69</sup> His reputation as the worst king had little or nothing to do with his political action or governance as a political figure and everything to do with his religious failures.

Separation from God both physically and spiritually (or ideologically) was listed among the consequences for failing to follow the Law. One of the curses in Deuteronomy says “the LORD will bring you, and the king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your ancestors have known, where you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone. You shall become an object of horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the LORD will lead you.”<sup>70</sup> This curse came to fruition physically with the deportations that took place under Assyrians and the Babylonians. Particularly after the exile in the sixth century, Manasseh is represented as the cause for the exile. Though deportations were not confined to his reign the historical texts blame

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<sup>68</sup> Statements such as this one regarding historical moments should be read as memory more than as history.

<sup>69</sup> 2 Chronicles 33:2-9. Quotes and the specific mention of the temple are from verses 2, 4-5, and 9. Each misdeed of Manasseh has a counterpart in the law; cf. 2 Kings 21.

<sup>70</sup> Deuteronomy 28:35-36.



the Exile on his unfaithfulness. This portrayal of him in Kings and Chronicles was an exilic depiction of him, using his actions to explain the exile even though it happened long after his death.

In Leviticus 18, the Jews were given direct explanation of the Law and its purpose. It details the reasons why the Law was in place saying,

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled); otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the LORD your God.<sup>71</sup>

This passage strongly alluded to the sense that the Law was put in place as a means of staying both physically and spiritually healthy. The abandonment or betrayal of these laws resulted in a sickly and weakened people who will be “vomited out” and separated from their God. The implication was that religious weakness would lead to physical weakness resulting in being overthrown or thrown out, by a stronger power. This was realized both physically and ideologically with the Babylonian Exile.

Manasseh’s failure to keep the Law, or perhaps more accurately his blatant disregard for it, had expected consequences. The account in Second Kings 21 vividly expanded upon YHWH's perceived discontent with Manasseh to an unredeemable point. Reiterated two more times in chapters 23 and 24, it became clear that Manasseh

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<sup>71</sup> Leviticus 18:24-30.

held court as the king who brought Israel out of favor with God and into the exile. Second Kings 24:3-4 attributed Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Judah to Manasseh saying "Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the LORD, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD was not willing to pardon."<sup>72</sup> With the conquest of Judah by Babylon, the Temple was destroyed and along with it much of what made the Jews distinctively Jewish. They were deported from their homeland, removed from the sight of YHWH, without a Temple, and had violated the Law, trampling on the Covenant made with their forefathers.

After Manasseh's death and the assassination of his son and successor Amon, the Judeans put Amon's eight year old son, Josiah, on the throne. Josiah initiated a number of reforms that were aimed primarily at religious life and were largely restorative in nature. His whole program was oriented towards restoring Judah to the Covenantal relationship with YHWH that had been damaged by previous kings. Inspired by the discovery of "a book of the Law" in the Temple, Josiah began to restore Jewish society, and more importantly reshape Jewish history.<sup>73</sup>

Josiah's focus was on religious reform and one of his core actions was to dismantled shrines of foreign cults. Along with removing any trace of pagan religion from within Jerusalem, Josiah restored the Covenant between the Jews and YHWH by reestablishing the Law among the people. While he banned foreign worship Josiah

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<sup>72</sup> 2 Kings 24:3-4. Previous mentions of Manasseh's sins as the ultimate cause of exile are found in 2 Kings 21:9-16, 23:26-27.

<sup>73</sup> 2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34-35

reinstated religious observances found in the Law that had been neglected such as Passover.<sup>74</sup> He purified Jerusalem from all idolatry and restored all the people to the Covenant. The book found in the Temple once again became the foundation of Jewish society. These reforms were significant to Jewish identity because they highlighted the importance of the Law and the Covenant as a foundation for their sense of separation. More significant than the reforms themselves, however, is the nature of the historical narrative to which they belonged.

Josiah's restoration of Jewish society was accompanied by the reshaping of their Law and the whole of their history. The story of Josiah's kingship and the subsequent version of Deuteronomy essentially rewrote history and formed a body of texts considered the Deuteronomist texts. This Deuteronomist history created retroactive continuity to account for the political climate both in terms of imperialism and a more localized political reality: the division between Judah and Israel. The book of Deuteronomy itself bore several of the markers of imperialism and contains heavy influence from Assyrian and Babylonian law codes.<sup>75</sup> The changes made to the early version of Deuteronomy were an attempt to restore and retain Jewish identity in the aftermath of subjection to imperial authority and its challenges. The emphasis on the importance of adhering to the Law and worshiping YHWH are indicative of the reforms during this period. Josiah comes at the end of a lengthy line of kings who, for the most part, accepted Assyrian and Babylonian control, compromised religion, and had their ranks infiltrated by foreigners effectively betraying their identity as the people of God,

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<sup>74</sup> 2 Kings 23:21-23.

<sup>75</sup> Stephanie Dalley "The Influence of Mesopotamia upon Israel and the Bible," *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*, ed. Stephanie Dalley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57-79.

set apart by YHWH.

Deuteronomy and other Deuteronomist texts, including the story of Josiah also created a communal identity and an identity that was uniquely Judean, effectively writing Israel out of their history and centralizing kingly authority to the Temple in Jerusalem. During Josiah's reign Assyrian power was in decline leaving what used to be the northern Kingdom of Israel available for acquisition. Josiah sought to expand the kingdom of Judah and the Deuteronomist history was his propaganda to do so.<sup>76</sup> By rewriting their history and weaving himself into the stories of the patriarchs, the kingdom of Judah effectively became the only kingdom, and Josiah became a Messianic figure giving legitimacy to his actions.

In this recreation of the past Josiah's reign was prophesied as time of restoration and Josiah himself was considered to be of the House of David, a Deuteronomistic epithet denoting a king and people that was favored by God. In First Kings 13, during the reign of Jeroboam, an altar was erected at Bethel to false gods. As Jeroboam ascended to offer a sacrifice,

the man of God, at the command of the LORD, cried out against the altar: 'O Altar, altar! Thus said the LORD: A son shall be born to the House of David, Josiah by name; and he shall slaughter upon you the priests of the shrines who bring offerings upon you. And human bones shall be burned upon you.'<sup>77</sup>

The mention of Josiah by name is evidence that it was constructed after his reforms had already taken place. Associating Josiah with the House of David was a claim of authority and a position anointed by God; an association that is in and of itself a Deuteronomist

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<sup>76</sup> Finkelstein, *The Bible Unearthed*, 283.

<sup>77</sup> 1 Kings 13:1-3.

creation. This retroactive prophecy provided a divine purpose for Josiah's actions granting him legitimacy. The ultimate result of Josiah's reforms and of the reshaping of their history was the reformation of a communal identity around a shared past.

This notion of a shared past denotes a history to which all Jews could ascribe, even in diaspora. It gave shared meaning to their present by using historical stories. With the creation of the Deuteronomist history, the authors and audience of these texts succeeded in restoring Judah to place of importance. They established Josiah as a member of the patriarchy elevating himself to the level of King David, the king who was "a man after [God's] own heart."<sup>78</sup> This refers to a time in their history when David was on the throne, effectively drawing their shared past all the way back to idealistic moment or golden age. At the core of that past was the Law that denounced the worship of any god besides YHWH.<sup>79</sup> This led to an expanded God-idea that encompassed the imperial gods in Jewish religious thought.

### **A God-Idea of their own**

For Jewish identity, the most significant restorative reform Josiah initiated was an act of restoring the people to a right relationship with YHWH and re-entering the Covenant. As discussed in the introduction, a key tenet of Jewish identity was exclusive worship of YHWH, but for much of their history this was not the case. According to the Jewish texts, one of Josiah's first acts, and his most prominent one, was the eradication of foreign worship from within Jerusalem and the centralization of Yahwism, YHWH only worship, on the Temple in Jerusalem.

Regarding Josiah's restoration of the Law and the Covenant, Second Kings 23:3

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<sup>78</sup> 1 Samuel 13:14.

<sup>79</sup> Levine, "Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism," 411.

says,

The King stood by the pillar in the House of the Lord and solemnized the Covenant before the Lord: that they would follow the Lord and observe His commandments, His injunctions, and His laws with all their heart and soul; that they would fulfill of the terms of this Covenant as inscribed upon the scroll. And all the people entered into the Covenant.<sup>80</sup>

As part of restoring the Covenant and the Law, Josiah recommitted the people of Judah to worship YHWH and denouncing other gods.<sup>81</sup> The emphasis on YHWH as the one and only God was the first of the Ten Commandments; “you shall have no other gods before me.”<sup>82</sup> The theological justification and explanation of historical actions was seen in Assyrian and Babylonian imperial ideology as justification for conquest. For the Jews, their God-idea expanded and grew to emphasize exclusion of other gods.

A God-idea denotes beliefs about their deity and the ways in which he interacts with the world around them. The Jewish God-idea expanded in response to the Assyrian and Babylonian God-ideas. We see the portrayal of non-Jewish peoples, specifically the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and later the Persian King Cyrus as the instruments of the Jewish god. This global perspective was one that rose out of the need for Judah to establish herself against the Assyrian imperial ideology. It elevated YHWH as the ultimate god, above those of the Assyrian and Babylonian pantheons. Additionally, YHWH became not just the god of the Jews but a global God. Proto-Isaiah puts YHWH in a global perspective in a way that no other texts had before. Isaiah 10: 5-19 reads,

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—  
the club in their hands is my fury!  
Against a godless nation I send him,

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<sup>80</sup> 2 Kings 23:3

<sup>81</sup> For example, Asherah was a goddess often referred to in biblical texts. Manasseh even placed an image of her in the Temple. The Jews had a history of turning to idols while wandering after their Exodus from Egypt erecting golden statues and worshiping the gods other than YHWH.

<sup>82</sup> Deuteronomy 5:7 and Exodus 20:3.

and against the people of my wrath I command him,  
 to take spoil and seize plunder,  
 and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.  
 But this is not what he intends,  
 nor does he have this in mind;  
 but it is in his heart to destroy,  
 and to cut off nations not a few...  
 When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem,  
 he[a] will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his  
 haughty pride...  
 Therefore the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts,  
 will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors,  
 and under his glory a burning will be kindled,  
 like the burning of fire.  
 The light of Israel will become a fire,  
 and his Holy One a flame;  
 and it will burn and devour  
 his thorns and briers in one day.  
 The glory of his forest and his fruitful land  
 the Lord will destroy, both soul and body,  
 and it will be as when an invalid wastes away.  
 The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few  
 that a child can write them down.<sup>83</sup>

This passage emphasized the two main developments of the God idea: the elevation of YHWH as sovereign and His global reign.<sup>84</sup> In this passage the king of Assyria was the rod of YHWH's anger and subject to His will. He was sent and commanded by YHWH to bring justice to Israel for forsaking their God and becoming a godless people. This ultimate sovereignty of God, even over a foreign ruler was a notable departure from Assyrian and Babylonian beliefs. Assyria, after being used to bring judgment upon Israel for their disobedience did not escape their own judgment for denying the sovereignty of YHWH. YHWH was not God alongside their pantheon but rather a God with power over them. This ultimately sovereign God not only superseded the gods of the Assyrians and

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<sup>83</sup> Isaiah 10: 5-19

<sup>84</sup> This Isaiah passage is part of a longer oration that ends with Israel's redemption and the restoration of a Davidic like king: namely Cyrus. This will be discussed more in the following chapter.

Babylonians but it granted to the Israelites an elevated position as his chosen people.<sup>85</sup>

The Jewish God-idea during this period was not newly monotheistic at the exclusion of other gods but it was differently monotheistic. In fact, their celebration of YHWH over the gods of the imperial powers was strengthened by the existence of those other gods. Without a competing God-idea, the assertion of His power was less effective. This period saw an expanded God-idea, not necessarily an exclusionary one. YHWH was elevated as the God of the Jews and significantly more powerful than His imperial counterparts. This response to imperial authority established a Jewish identity that retained separation and created continuity with their past by retroactively establishing His power.

### **Restoration Prophecy**

During the eras of Assyrian and Babylonian rule, prophecy in Jewish communities shifted form. Prophets became public figures commenting on international and public affairs rather than serving as advisors to the king, marking another new departure from imperial norms. This is indicative of the changing social and political structure of Jewish identity and the need to retain religious continuity in an imperial context. The theological ideas of a global God and His power over non-Jews were reflected in texts referring to the Babylonian Exile, especially prophetic ones. Once Babylon had finally gained the upper hand and had control of the Levant, its kings sought to assert control and diminish the chance for rebellion. In 587 the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II besieged Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and deported the

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<sup>85</sup> For an overview of the historiography surrounding the development of Monotheism in Jewish religion see Robert Gnuse "The Emergence of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: A survey of recent scholarship," *Religion* 29, no. 4 (1999).



people. According to the Biblical account:

He carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house; he cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord, which King Solomon of Israel had made, all this as the Lord had foretold. He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land. He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the elite of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. The king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, seven thousand, the artisans and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war.<sup>86</sup>

This exile was viewed from a Jewish perspective as a punishment for forsaking the Law. Much like the many kings before him, King Jehoiachin had "done evil in the sight of the LORD." His reign was compared to that of Manasseh and the Jews believed that the exile was a result of disobedience, yet another instance of creating retroactive continuity and using a retroactively constructed past to explain the present. But while they constructed a past to explain the present, it was also necessary to construct a future, and the focus on prophecy provided a connection between the newly built past and the anticipated future.

Similar to the purpose of Isaiah, prophetic passages are also rich with this intent to restore Jewish identity to a stable condition amidst imperial upheaval. The Isaiah passage discussed earlier referred specifically to the conquests of Assyria. However, it was part of a larger cycle that ended with redemption of Israel and the restoration of a Davidic like reign. This theme of reform and restoration extended to the prophetic texts following the Babylonian Exile. These texts explored why something such as the exile happened. The authors of these texts utilized the sovereign God-idea heavily

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<sup>86</sup> 2 Kings 24:13-16, 25:9-12.

throughout and developed a new worldview that looked both backwards and forward, hinging on the exile and the destruction of the Temple. After the Babylonian Exile, prophetic texts such as the book of Ezekiel intentionally constructed a new world view utilizing this new God-idea in order to create a usable past and a Covenant protected future despite exile.

Coupled with the destruction of the Temple, this exile was an explicit attack on the two most physical aspects of the Jewish identity that had been in formation over the previous two centuries. Josiah had rededicated the Temple and tethered Jewish identity to its significance. The Babylonians were the final destroyers of what had been the physical foundation of Jewish identity. With the Babylonian Exile the house of the Covenant was destroyed and the people dispersed, once again, across the ancient Near East. Following Josiah's strengthening of identity, the exile caused a new wave of literary reinforcement to accommodate this detrimental shift in political and social circumstance.

The book of Ezekiel offers a glimpse of Jewish reaction to the Babylonian Exile and the destruction of the Temple. Written in the wake of the exile in sixth century BCE, Ezekiel is a particularly unique book because of its authorship and composition. In contrast to other prophetic books of the Bible, Ezekiel was written and edited with the intention to be preserved and used for instructional purposes at a later time, as well as speak to contemporary audiences.<sup>87</sup> Ezekiel was a prophetic book that addressed the people's theological crisis of identity as a result of the Exile. The book begins with

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<sup>87</sup> Stephen Cook, "Introduction to Ezekiel," *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha: an Ecumenical Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 1160.

prophecies about the fall of Judah, then prophecies of the destruction of other peoples, and concludes with restoration prophecies for the Jews.

As would be expected from the evidence in Second Kings, the destruction of Jerusalem was portrayed as divine punishment for disobedience. The prophet Ezekiel lived through the rule of king Jehoiachin and the exile by king Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE. The first part of the book was set prior to this and prophesied the coming destruction. Of course this was retroactive prophecy, as he identified the prophecies as being given in the fifth year of the exile.<sup>88</sup> In chapter 20 a diasporic existence was mentioned in some detail with explicit references to the exodus from Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness.<sup>89</sup> In addition to the trope of diaspora, a removal from the Promised Land, Ezekiel prophesied YHWH's departure from the Temple.<sup>90</sup>

Despite these two tragic hits to the Jews identity, set apart by YHWH, Ezekiel prophesied the destruction of seven other nations. These destructions were the punishment for various injustices against Jerusalem. Tyre, for example, was destroyed for gloating over the destruction of Jerusalem and then claiming to use it as an economic advantage.<sup>91</sup> In effect, Ezekiel maintained Jerusalem's identity as being sacred to YHWH in spite of the punishment. Amidst the punishment for her disobedience, God equally punished other communities for their atrocities towards the Jews as the chosen ones much as He did to Assyria in the Isaiah passage. This ideology helped keep the identity of the Jews intact even in diaspora and with the destruction of the Temple.

Ezekiel's prophecy of restoration is especially noteworthy when addressing the

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<sup>88</sup> Ezekiel 1:2,

<sup>89</sup> Ezekiel, 20:33-36

<sup>90</sup> Ezekiel 9:3, 10:4, 11:22.

<sup>91</sup> Ezekiel 26.

formation and transformation Jewish identity in relation to imperial power over time. Chapter 37 contains what is perhaps one of the most famous prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, “The Valley of the Dry Bones.” In this vision Ezekiel is in a valley of bones representing “the whole House of Israel.”<sup>92</sup> The Lord commanded him to prophesy over the bones and they would be brought back to life, Israel would be restored. In verses 21 and following, YHWH promised to “take the Israelite people from among the nations they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter, and bring to their own land.”<sup>93</sup> They would never again be two kingdoms, and they would once again be God’s people. Verses 24-28 were reminiscent of the Covenant established between Abraham and YHWH as well as between his descendants including David, a significant addition for future events.

My Servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. They shall follow My rules and faithfully obey my laws. Thus they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time. I will make a Covenant with them—I will establish them and multiply them, and I will place My Sanctuary among them forever. My Presence shall rest over them; I will be their God and they shall be My people. And when My Sanctuary abides among them forever, the nations shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel.<sup>94</sup>

In this passage, the author of Ezekiel addressed each of the tenets as something affected by diaspora but also to be restored by God. By evoking David, not only was the author referring back to the shared and blessed patriarchal ancestry, he was referring specifically to a prosperous and blessed point in their history. The idea that a future Messiah would come from the line of David was to believe that the Jews were to be

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<sup>92</sup> Ezekiel 37:11-14.

<sup>93</sup> Ezekiel 37: 21-23.

<sup>94</sup> Ezekiel 37:26-28; cf. Jeremiah 31:33.

restored to a golden age. In this almost utopian picture of the future, the people will follow the Law and be returned to the Promised Land of their ancestors. Their time for wandering will be finished and their rightful place restored. Additionally, the Covenant and the Temple would both be restored.<sup>95</sup>

This future orientation allowed the Jews to retain an identity that was still tied to the Temple and the Promised Land despite the fact that they were no longer physically attached. The “wandering Jew serves as emblem of the people’s fate, a repeated theme in art and literature through the ages.”<sup>96</sup> One common manifestation of this was the repeated association with the exodus from Egypt found throughout their Law code and other scriptural texts. The adoption of a “wandering Jew” element to their identity implied a people temporarily displaced from their Promised Land. Thus, as the Jews’ diasporic reality became prolonged, these conceptual identifications transformed to help them exist within a political that at times challenged their identity as Israelites, and helped them to maintain their separate status as the chosen of YHWH.

Prophecies, such as this one in Ezekiel, that used the past and future to make sense of the present were a tool used by ancient Jewish authors to restore a sense of identity despite a diasporic existence. By retroactively writing a history in which their disobedience brought about these tragic events, their diasporic state was no longer the result of imperial power but the handiwork of YHWH. This aided in retaining their identity as separate under YHWH’s favor as they responded to the challenges posed by Assyrian and Babylonian imperialism.

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<sup>95</sup> The significance of the Temple and Promised Land is tied to the ancient Near Eastern belief that gods were attached to the land and had a physical presence there. This will be discussed more fully in chapter two.

<sup>96</sup> Erich Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans*, 1.

The five tenets of Jewish identity I outlined in the introduction began to take shape during this period as the Jews were forced to forge an identity that could overcome their subjugation to imperial power. Thus the significance of the Temple, a kingship with its foundation in a celebrated ancestry, and the preservation of the Law and the Covenant became vital to Jewish identity. The formation of these tenets in the first place, and the vitality that they held within Jewish religious thought and culture should be understood as responses to imperialism. While in the political and ideological crossfire of the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Jews responded with an assertion of their own God. When the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and instigated mass deportations, much of their identity was left without foundation, and the Jews were in a position lacking an identity that kept them separate. The monotheistic and globally sovereign nature of God thus rose as prominent aspects along with the Law.

The Jewish use of literature to create this identity is evident in the recording of these reforms and in passages like Isaiah. In the Isaiah passage, we see a God-idea developing in response to imperial authority that specifically guided the Jews even under imperial rule. This specific God-idea bypassed the Near Eastern idea that gods were directly associated with physical space and placed the Jews in an ideological position separate from and above the imperial powers. The prophetic books following the Exile continue this ideological thread and sought to answer fully why such a travesty happened. Notably, these prophecies intentionally defined the Jews in light of a coming restoration: namely a Davidic king by the name of Cyrus the Great.

### **Chapter 3: Reconstruction**

In 539 BCE, Cyrus conquered Babylon and ushered in a new era of imperialism. Following the brutal and turbulent reigns of the Assyrians and Babylonians, Cyrus and the Achaemenid Empire broke the mold when it came to imperial structures in the ancient Near East. This shift in power had profound impact on the Jews as they adjusted to a propitious ruler. Rather than presenting himself as conqueror, Cyrus' adherence to local gods and religious structures within the empire granted him a favorable reputation among the Jews. Persian imperialism, though administratively similar to previous empires was ideologically different. In contrast to his imperial predecessors, Cyrus treated his subjects with respect to their diverse local traditions and effectively ended the Exile by allowing the Jews to return home and rebuild the Temple. As a result some Jews returned and had to construct a worldview and an identity that fit with a benevolent ruler. Other Jews chose to stay in their diasporic homes and had to construct an identity around a chosen diaspora, not just an inflicted one. The foundational elements for this construction were laid during the Assyrian and Babylonian periods. Under the Persians, however, the Jews built upon these foundational elements to construct an identity in response to a different type of imperial authority.

#### **Jewish response: To return to the Promised Land or stay in exile**

Cyrus' decree created a significant choice for the Jews to make: return home to the Promised Land and reconstruct the Temple, or to stay where they were. Upon being allowed to return home from the exile, many Jews chose to stay in their diasporic

homes indicating how successfully their identity as Jews had adapted to a diasporic existence. Yet, the choice still required some attempts at justification. The choice to stay should be examined on two fronts: the motivation to stay and the justification of that choice. Given their history under the Assyrians and the Babylonians, Cyrus' decree was a chance to re-establish the physical aspects of their identity. They could finally return to the Promised Land, rebuild their Temple, live a life separate from other peoples, and restore their relationship with YHWH, and many chose to do so. Despite this, many others chose to stay in their diasporic homes.

As a result of Persian imperialism, Jewish texts from this period show a renegotiation of identity that reflected this choice. The Jews no longer needed the Promised Land physically because they had the promise of its restoration one day. Thus, not returning to the Promised Land to rebuild the Temple was a viable option that did not violate their identity as Jews. Additionally, restoration prophecies made accepting Cyrus possible. By adopting Messianic language to describe Cyrus, they no longer needed a Jewish king because Cyrus was the anointed one; he was situated in their own ancestry.

The adoption of the wandering Jew motif and the emphasis on the Exodus from Egypt in their Law and history made living in diaspora a central part of their identity. The Jews had already constructed a story of their past that explained the reasons for Exile and granted them a communal identity that explained diaspora. During the Persian period, Jewish texts embraced the diaspora embraced it to some extent by associating it with the Exodus from Egypt. The story of the Exodus was a temporary displacement that ended in settling in the Promised Land. Choosing a diasporic



existence in a permanent sense was justified by anointed representation of Cyrus, the ideological nature of the Promised Land and the Temple, and the global nature of YHWH. During the Persian period the Jews more fully embraced this aspect of their identity when they chose to remain in diaspora under a benevolent foreign king.

Historical reasons for staying included the chance for social mobility and the ownership of land, not to mention having an established way of life in their current location. The specific reasons for staying are not recorded and to attempt to pinpoint the correct reason would imply a single uniform answer, and a clear insight into their personal realities. Grabbe highlights an economic incentive. To return to Judah meant returning to a country that was “small, had a backwards economy, and was surrounded by neighbors who at times could be hostile.”<sup>97</sup> More important than why they actually stayed is why they could stay, and how they justified their choice. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Jews renegotiated their identity to accommodate life away from the Promised Land void of a Temple. They developed promises of future restoration that made the past understandable and the present bearable. This ideology enabled them to live a chosen diasporic existence.

In this chapter I argue that changes made to Jewish religious identity during the Persian period can begin to be recognized as patterns of intentional response. Significant shifts addressed in chapter two have counterparts during Persian rule. The Messianic characterization of Cyrus had its foundation in the significance of the Davidic king to which Josiah and restoration prophecy subscribed. This also necessitated a

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<sup>97</sup> Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, 121.

further developed God idea that extended to foreign kings and foreign peoples.<sup>98</sup>

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah offered a Jewish perspective on the return to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the reconstruction of Jewish society under Ezra's leadership. These texts represented Jewish memory of these events making them invaluable. Ezra and Nehemiah's focus on preserving religious in Jerusalem and the texts themselves are historical in nature. Similar issues were expanded upon in fictional texts such as Esther and Ruth, two stories that dealt with marriage to foreigners. With these stories, however, the extent of Jewish identity expanded beyond Jerusalem and beyond those who were ethnically Jewish. These two stories were constructed to emphasize the ideological aspects of Jewish identity to accommodate a diasporic existence and integration with non-Jews.

Finally, the Jews in Elephantine serve as a real world, non-literary case study of these ideologies made manifest. Esther and Ruth were literary representations designed to explain and construct an image of Jewish life that embodied specific ideological axioms. The archives at Elephantine, however, provide insight into the everyday application of this newly formed identity within a Jewish community existing under Persian imperialism outside the Promised Land. What is especially significant about this community was its chronological relationship to the other diasporic communities. They were not a product of a forced Exile to begin with and yet, they still adhered to an identity that had its foundation in response to that event.

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<sup>98</sup> Ezekiel 17:22-24. Jewish prophecy from this time speaks of a Messiah, or a savior. This Messiah will deliver the Jews from worldly troubles, imperial domination, and restore them to their rightful place. Cyrus is depicted with Messianic language and fits much of the description. Though not the ultimate Messiah, he certainly was a Messianic figure.

## Persian Imperialism

Cyrus conquered Babylon and established the Achaemenid Empire bringing with him a new political order.<sup>99</sup> In stark contrast to the Assyrians and the Babylonians before him, Cyrus set a new precedent in terms of how he treated his subjects. In chapter two I introduced the idea of divine kingship, how the Assyrians and the Babylonians used it to legitimize their rule, and how the Jewish people responded. Persians also had strong religious beliefs that factored into their imperial ideology, but Cyrus had a strikingly different approach to subject people on this issue. Mazdaism, the Persian religion was henotheistic, with Ahura Mazda as the god outranking the rest of the pantheon. However, rather than claim the authority of Ahura Mazda to legitimize his rule like the Assyrians and Babylonians did, Cyrus co-opted the authority of the local gods to establish his own authority. He also did not follow in his imperial predecessors' footsteps in terms of political upheaval like deportations or religious sacrilege such as sacking religious temples.<sup>100</sup>

Texts describing Cyrus and his rule pictured him as religiously and politically tolerant and well liked by those under his rule. The three sources we have that speak of the Persian capture of Babylon speak primarily of the Babylonian king Nabonidus and his failure to fulfill religious duties.<sup>101</sup> The Nabonidus Chronicle emphasizes several times that Nabonidus was not even in Babylon for much of his rule. As a severe

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<sup>99</sup> Joannès, *The Age of Empire: Mesopotamia in the first Millennium*, 135.

<sup>100</sup> There is no evidence that the Jews were deported under Persian rule and Cyrus himself does not appear to have decreed any such actions.

<sup>101</sup> In this analysis we will be looking primarily at the Cyrus Cylinder, a Persian source, the Nabonidus Chronicle, a Babylonian source, and of course the Hebrew Bible. Nabonidus is not actually mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible. Instead the Biblical portrayal of Nebuchadnezzar bears some similarities to the historical accounts of Nabonidus. Regardless of this discrepancy, Cyrus' rise to power is recorded with a significant amount of praise.

consequence, the New Year's festival could not take place. His preference of the god Sin over Marduk, caused a lot of dissatisfaction among his subjects including the priests of Marduk. This dissatisfaction drove groups of Babylonians to support Cyrus, the Persian king. So much so in fact that in 539 BCE, "the army of Cyrus without a battle entered Babylon."<sup>102</sup> Even Nabonidus' own subjects in the heart of his empire were dissatisfied with his rule, and according to this text, their dissatisfaction was largely grounded in religion. The Nabonidus Chronicle was a Babylonian source that recounted Cyrus' capture of Babylon as a favorable event.

The Cyrus Cylinder in particular laid out Cyrus' imperial policy and the nature of his rule. Upon conquering Babylon, Cyrus established his role as Babylonian king in contrast to the chaos Babylonia had endured under Nabonidus and he restored order rather than conquered. Matt Waters pointed out that for the Persians,

The king is the guardian of order as the divine agent, created by and supported by Ahuramazda who created all else...The king creates order out of chaos, and wars must be fought to do this, especially if it is a matter of protecting the king's integrity. The king places fundamental importance on what is right and by extension he is the antithesis of what is wrong...The proper display of 'kingly qualities'... may be condensed to one word...balance.<sup>103</sup>

The belief that the duty of a Persian king was to maintain order helps to explain some of Cyrus' actions. Cyrus did not approach his subjects as a conquering king, but rather as someone who would restore them to order and stability. He even went so far as to invoke local deities to maintain his divine authority instead of asserting Persian gods.

By legitimizing his reign with local deities, Cyrus gained favor with the

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<sup>102</sup> Amelie Kuhrt, "The Nabonidus Chronicle," *The Persian Empire: a Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 15b-16a, 51.

<sup>103</sup> Matt Waters, *Ancient Persia: A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 BCE.*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 150.

Babylonians and invoked ideas of divine favor. According to the Cylinder, Marduk, the god of the Babylonians, “searched through all the countries, examined (them), he sought a just ruler to suit his heart, he took him by the hand: Cyrus, king of Anshan, he called, for dominion over the totality he named his name.”<sup>104</sup> Cyrus’ claim of this blessing by the Babylonian god, Marduk, helped to legitimize his reign in the eyes of the Babylonians. The Cylinder even portrayed Cyrus as the savior of the Babylonian people saying,

Without battle and fighting he let him enter his city Babylon. He saved Babylon from its oppression. Nabonidus, the king who did not honour him, he handed over to him. All the inhabitants of Babylon, the whole of the land of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors knelt before him, kissed his feet, rejoiced at his kingship; their faces shone. 'The lord, who through his help has brought the dead to life, who in (a time of) disaster and oppression has benefited all' - thus they joyfully celebrated him, honoured his name. I, Cyrus, king of the universe, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters, son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan, eternal seed of kingship, whose reign was loved by Bel and Nabul and whose kingship they wanted to please their hearts - when I had entered Babylon peacefully, I set up, with acclamation and rejoicing, the seat of lordship in the palace of the ruler. Marduk, the great lord, [ ... ] me the great heart, [ ... ] of Babylon, daily I cared for his Worship. My numerous troops marched peacefully through Babylon. I did not allow any troublemaker to arise in the whole land of Sumer and Akkad. The city of Babylon and all its cult-centres I maintained in well-being. The inhabitants of Babylon, [who] against the will [of the gods ... ] a yoke unsuitable for them, I allowed them to find rest from their exhaustion, their servitude I relieved. Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced at my [good] deeds. Me, Cyrus, the king, who worships him, and Cambyses, my very own son, as well as all my troops he blessed mercifully.<sup>105</sup>

Later, the text also placed Cyrus in relationship to the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal,

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<sup>104</sup> Amelie Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder, “*The Persian Empire: a Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London: Routledge, 2013), Lines 9b-12, p 71.

<sup>105</sup> Kuhrt, *The Cyrus Cylinder*, Lines 17-28, p 71.

extending his legitimacy even further.<sup>106</sup> Cyrus' brilliance here was in tailoring his imperial rule to the expectations of the conquered people. He inserted himself and his empire into their already established worldviews rather than competing with them. Additionally, he actively engaged their worldviews by returning their deities to their shrines after being taken by the Assyrians.

The dwelling place of a god's image was significant to communities in the ancient Near East due to the belief that gods were tied to the land. The Assyrians, upon conquering Judah and deporting the people, sent a priest in order to learn the laws of the local God, YHWH. In Second Kings 5, a man called Naaman after being healed in the river Jordan, requested "two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD."<sup>107</sup> For Naaman, to take the dirt was to take the continued blessings and favor of the Jewish God. In Second Kings 17 after the Assyrian king Shalmaneser exiled the Jews from their land he repopulated their land with other non-Jewish people groups.<sup>108</sup> According to the biblical texts, these new people did not worship "the god of the land" and suffered for it.<sup>109</sup> In each of these cases the Assyrians recognized the existence and power of the other god and seeking ways to appease him or earn his favor. In this way, Cyrus' rule may have been a new form of imperial power but was consistent with traditional beliefs about God and place.

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<sup>106</sup> Kuhrt, *The Cyrus Cylinder*, Lines 38-45, p 72.

<sup>107</sup> 2 Kings 5:17

<sup>108</sup> This event was discussed in more detail in Chapter two of this project. 2 Kings 17 makes it clear that the Jews believed that this attack by the Assyrians and the deportation was a result of the fact that they had turned from their God and were worshipping other idols. This is also an indication that the Jews were not being treated any differently than other conquered peoples. The likelihood that the people placed in Judah were there for the same reasons people were taken out of Judah. They were subjected to the same acts of conquest and deportation.

<sup>109</sup> 2 Kings 17

The Babylonians believed in similar ties between the land and their gods made manifest in the idea of gods as physical inhabitants of this land. The treatment of their statues was indicative of their significance. Nabonidus, the last king of the Babylonian Empire exploited this belief by removing key gods from his subjects' shrines and taking them back to Babylon. P.-A. Beaulieu points out that,

Rather than incur the capture of their gods and the resulting implications of such capture, namely, that the gods were abandoning the city and calling for its destruction, cities often tried to prevent the transfer of the statues to enemy territory, since continued possession of them in the face of adversity proved that the gods were still protecting and supporting their people and native land.<sup>110</sup>

The motivation for removing these gods was two fold. First, it removed the gods from their people resulting in the belief of abandonment and the shifting of the gods' favor to the one who succeeded in their theft. The destruction of the Jewish Temple had a similar effect. As Beaulieu pointed out, it was a common belief that if the image of the god left its rightful place then the god himself had also left, removing its favor and protection. Therefore, it was important for ancient Near Eastern peoples to retain the images of their gods in their own temples. Both the Assyrians and the Babylonians used this as a means of weakening their opponents. Additionally to successfully take the gods was a sign that the gods had already left and the relocation to Babylon or Assyria was an indication the gods actually wished to dwell there.

One of Cyrus's actions was to return these figures to their rightful places reestablishing the gods to their shrines. This act was one of his "anti-Nabonidus themes" that served as propaganda to set himself up as a better ruler than the ones he

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<sup>110</sup> Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "An Episode in the Fall of Babylon to the Persians." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52, no. 4 (1993): 241-242.

was replacing.<sup>111</sup> The Cyrus Cylinder says,

As for the gods of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus, to the wrath of the lord of the gods, brought to Babylon, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I (Cyrus) caused them to dwell in peace in their sanctuaries, (in) pleasing dwellings. May all the gods I brought (back) to their sanctuaries plead daily before Bel and Nabu for the lengthening of my days, may they intercede favorably on my behalf.<sup>112</sup>

Not only did Cyrus return the gods to their people, he acknowledged their power even over himself. This catering to the conquered peoples is what set Cyrus' reign apart from the previous empires and is at least part of what allowed him to create stability in such a diverse empire.

The Mesopotamians were not the only ones treated with such tolerance and benevolence by Cyrus. The Cyrus Cylinder included religious, political, and social edicts for those under the Achaemenid Empire. For the Jews, this meant he allowed them to return home, authorized the reconstruction of their Temple, and even paid for the project from the imperial treasury.<sup>113</sup> The treatment of the Jews as remembered in the Hebrew Bible is somewhat paralleled by the statements made in the Cyrus Cylinder and reflects a consistency in Cyrus' policies.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, the Jewish depiction of Cyrus in these events is nearly Messianic, referring to him as the anointed one, chosen by God,

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 243

<sup>112</sup> Kuhrt, *The Cyrus Cylinder*, lines 30-34.

<sup>113</sup> Ezra 1:1-4.

<sup>114</sup> Laurie Pearce, "Judean: A special Status in Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Babylonia?" *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period*, edited by Oded Lipschits, et al., (Winona Lake; Eisenbrauns, 2011), 267-275; Kuhrt, *The Cyrus Cylinder*, lines 31- 34a.p 72. "From [ ... ] Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, Zamban, Meturnu and Der as far as the territory of Gutium, the cities on the other side of the Tigris, whose dwelling-places had fallen into ruin the gods who dwelt there I returned to their home and let them move into an eternal dwelling. All their people I collected and brought them back to their homes. And the gods of Sumer and Akkad, which Nabonidus to the fury of the lord of the gods had brought into Babylon, at the order of Marduk, the great lord, in well-being I caused them to move into a dwelling-place pleasing to their hearts in their sanctuaries."



shepherd, and redeemer.<sup>115</sup>

### **A Foreign King and a Global God**

In a passage from Isaiah 45, the author drew a direct and deliberate link between YHWH and Cyrus. Cyrus was a victor and one who served YHWH on behalf of the Jews, but it also situated YHWH in a new position.

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him— and the gates shall not be closed: I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.<sup>116</sup>

In this passage, YHWH was not just above other gods, He was the only God. Cyrus' victory was portrayed as a joint effort between YHWH and Cyrus, whom the LORD called by name and anointed. As Lisbeth Fried pointed out, "The term 'YHWH's anointed' is more than a title. It connotes a theology. It refers to the legitimate Judean ruler, divinely installed, divinely protected, even numinous."<sup>117</sup> The legitimacy of Cyrus' reign in the eyes of his Jewish subjects was reliant upon a universal God; a God that not only ruled the Jews, but the whole world, that ordained all things to accomplish his will, even rulers who did not acknowledge Him as God.

Anointing Cyrus signified that this foreign king was now associated with the

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<sup>115</sup> Ezra 1:1;4, 6-16, 6:3, 6:14; Jeremiah 27:22; Isaiah 41:1-10, 44:28; Isaiah 45:1; 2 Chron. 36:22-23.

<sup>116</sup> Isaiah 45:1-6.

<sup>117</sup> Lisbeth S. Fried, "Cyrus the Messiah? The historical background to Isaiah 45: 1," *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 04 (2002), 380.

Davidic line of ancestry. The same one prophesied about in Ezekiel after the destruction of the Temple. This presentation of Cyrus as a chosen and anointed one of God for Judah's restoration is notably different from other biblical passages that address foreign kings such as Isaiah 10 discussed in chapter two. Isaiah 10 and 45 had similarities, and the purpose of both these passages was to elevate YHWH, not the king. However, in the case of Cyrus, the association with the Davidic line placed him in strong connection to previous Jewish kings, specifically Josiah, who had done "what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the ways of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left."<sup>118</sup> The association with David was an association with an age that once was and will be again. Though there was no direct indication that Cyrus was the Messiah promised in Ezekiel, crafting an association with the house of David and his restoration of the people to their homeland was intentional. Not only did it provide a legitimate way for the Jews to accept his reign, it also lent legitimacy to the prophecies of a coming restoration. By associating Cyrus with the Davidic prophecy and the restoration of the Promised Land and the Temple, the Jews could theologially justify the choice to stay in diaspora and consider him their king.

Cyrus also fit into Jewish identity as the one meant to restore them spiritually to YHWH. Isaiah 45:4-6 stated that YHWH chose Cyrus "so that they (the Jews) might know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no one other."<sup>119</sup> This final statement directly related Cyrus to YHWH on a theological level. In Jewish memory, Cyrus was not just the Messianic figure who would restore them to their land, his purpose was to proclaim YHWH as the

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<sup>118</sup> 2 Kings 22:2.

<sup>119</sup> Isaiah 45:6.

one and only God to His chosen people. Mark Smith noted that monotheism in Deutero Isaiah is perfectly suited to Israel's "loss of land and king. Yahweh is not just the god of Israel (both as land and people), but of all lands and nations."<sup>120</sup> This monotheistic polemic and the Messianic depictions of Cyrus were the Judean response to a new imperial regime and created continuity allowing them to preserve their religious identity.

Jewish acceptance of Cyrus and the Messianic depictions of him were contingent upon a God idea that was big enough to accommodate a foreign king. This was an ideology we saw developing during the Assyrian and Babylonian periods. The Isaiah 10 passage discussed in chapter two was intentional in its portrayal of YHWH as global in the sense that even the Assyrian kings were under His control and subject to His will for His people. However, with regards to Cyrus, the Judean God-idea was developed further.<sup>121</sup>

In contrast to the passages discussed in chapter two, the second part of Isaiah, Deutero Isaiah, presents YHWH not just as global and dominant, but as global and solitary.<sup>122</sup> Smith wrote that these monotheistic statements are situated in three main polemic arguments about YHWH: YHWH is the "creator of the world and the master of the present," YHWH chose Israel for good and punishment both in the past and the present, and finally, that YHWH was alive and unlike the lifeless idols and images

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<sup>120</sup> Mark Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 179.

<sup>121</sup> Isaiah as a whole is split into three sections, Proto Isaiah, Deutero Isaiah, and Trito Isaiah, each written in a different period and by different authors. Proto Isaiah was written pre exile and Deutero Isaiah was an exilic composition. This accounts for the difference between them and makes the book as a whole extremely useful to tracking continuity over time.

<sup>122</sup> Other monotheistic statements in Deutero Isaiah, can be found in Isaiah 43:10-11; 44:6-8; 45:5-7, 14, 18, 21, 46:9.

around them.<sup>123</sup> These three basic claims, specifically the final one, were aimed at positioning YHWH not just above other gods but to the full exclusion of others making Him God of the universe. This development in the Jewish God-idea was one justification for staying in diaspora under Cyrus' rule.

In Isaiah 41, one of the earliest monotheistic statements in Deutero Isaiah drew a striking difference between Cyrus relationship to YHWH and that of the Assyrian king.

Isaiah 41 reads:

Who has roused a victor from the east, summoned him to his service? He delivers up nations to him, and tramples kings under foot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. He pursues them and passes on safely, scarcely touching the path with his feet. Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, am first, and will be with the last.<sup>124</sup>

The “victor from the east”, mentioned at the beginning of this passage is Cyrus. Right away this as a glaring distinction from the mentions of Assyria “a rod of anger.” Rather than an instrument of God’s will, Cyrus was described as a servant of YHWH. The idea that Cyrus was chosen by God to be their king was a necessary detail to justify accepting a foreign ruler. To set up Cyrus in this way, the Jews also had to set YHWH in a global position that was different from previous depictions of YHWH. For the Jews to accept a King that was not foreign YHWH had to be a God of foreigners as well.

The Jews were free, even encouraged, to claim their own deities under Persian rule. Cyrus’ anointing by a universal God allowed the Jews to consider him a legitimate king despite the fact that he was not Jewish. However, a core aspect of being Jewish, as discussed previously, was still centered on being separate. This separateness was

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<sup>123</sup> Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 181-182.

<sup>124</sup> Isaiah 41:2-4

maintained by claiming an anointing of Cyrus for the good of the Jews specifically. The breaking down of social and political barriers by a global God allowed for Jews to choose a diasporic existence and maintain a foreign king. But how they were to interact with foreigners in their midst was a different issue.

### **Ezra's Reforms**

In addition to reconstructing their God-idea in response to a positive imperial power, the Jews had to reconstruct their social laws to retain their Jewish identity while intermixing with non-Jews. Despite having crafted an identity that allowed them to live among foreigners, integrating foreigners into their mix was a new reality under Persian imperialism around which they had to reconstruct their theological identity.

Ezra was an exiled Jew who returned to Jerusalem to begin construction on the Second Temple. He also began a significant reconstruction of Jewish society. Under king Artaxerxes, while the Jews were still reconstructing the Temple, Ezra recorded a letter sent to him by the king. In a direct statement to Ezra, Artaxerxes said,

And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them. All who will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on them, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of their goods or for imprisonment.<sup>125</sup>

Artaxerxes gave Ezra the command to set up magistrates of his own kind who follow the Torah. In accordance with this edict, Ezra enacted reforms that were specifically oriented towards keeping Jews separate from gentiles. This was primarily accomplished by reconstructing the Jewish identity around the Torah, which was

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<sup>125</sup> Ezra 7:25-26.

conveniently justified by Persian imperial ideology in the letter from Artaxerxes. Similar to the earlier restorative reforms of Josiah, Ezra revitalized the Torah as the essential foundation of Jewish life and identity. In Nehemiah 8, Ezra initiated the first public reading of the Torah. Both men and women participated as Ezra read from the “law book of Moses.”<sup>126</sup> The people of Israel purportedly “wept when they heard the words of the lord,” and were charged to cease their weeping and to not “be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”<sup>127</sup> This moment’s significance lies in the public acceptance of the Torah as key to the functioning of Jewish society. Specifically, Ezra’s adherence to the Torah was an emphasis on remaining separate from non-Jews.

At numerous points, Ezra referred to “the faithfulness of the returned exiles” and lamented grievously over those who “have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with abominations...”<sup>128</sup> Tamara Eskenazi said, the “ethnocentric agenda can be understood, therefore, as a struggle for identity in the midst of a sea of more powerful nationalities.”<sup>129</sup> Eskenazi was right in calling it a struggle for identity, but it is important to note that Ezra’s concerns in this instance were with people directly inside Judah. The grievous actions recorded here in Ezra were epitomized by intermarriage, something he sought to abolish by putting the people under oath to put away their foreign wives. But Ezra’s reforms were problematized by the fact that not all Jews returned to Jerusalem. Within Judah marriage could be controlled and separation maintained. Outside of Judah, however, Ezra’s reforms seem to have contradictions in

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<sup>126</sup> Nehemiah 8:1.

<sup>127</sup> Nehemiah 8:9, 11.

<sup>128</sup> Ezra 9.

<sup>129</sup>Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “From Exile and Restoration to Exile and Reconstruction,” in *Exile and Restoration Revisited*, ed. Gary N. Knoppers, et al. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 88.

other postexilic texts.

Ezra's determination to preserve the purity of the people was grounded in his attempts to restore the Jews to the Covenant. Upon becoming aware of the foreign marriage issue he offered up this prayer:

I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.

But now, for a brief moment, the Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands **you** gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.'<sup>130</sup>

In this prayer Ezra made his intent clear. He invoked the sins of the past and the resultant diaspora as a legitimizer for his condemnation of the foreign marriages.

Almost as a means of manipulation he used the fact that God had been good to them by allowing them to return to the Promised Land to convince the people to give up their association with the non-Jews. His vehement desire for the Jews to send away their foreign wives was an attempt at restoring and preserving purity and distinction from non-Jews.

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<sup>130</sup> Ezra 9:6-12

Isaiah 56 seemed to present a contrary idea of how the Jews were to interact with foreigners. In contrast to Ezra dictates, this passage seemed to indicate that non-Jews were to be welcomed to the Temple and into the community. Situated in a passage that depicted a community that had been restored to the Covenant, Isaiah 56:6-7 reads,

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,  
and hold fast my Covenant—  
these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.  
Thus says the Lord God,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already gathered.<sup>131</sup>

This passage condoned and even welcomed foreigners into the midst of Jewish society and religion. On a base level this passage was a contradiction to Ezra's entire program. It called for the integration of foreigners into His presence and the Covenant. It is important to note that the foreigners mentioned here were of a specific nature. This passage was specifically denoting foreigners who had joined themselves to the Jewish God and His law.<sup>132</sup> Rather than being contrary to Ezra's reforms, however, this passage emphasized the diasporic nature of the reconstruction of identity during this time.<sup>133</sup>

Later references in Ezra make it clear that the issue with these foreign was that

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<sup>131</sup> Isaiah 56:6-7.

<sup>132</sup> It is also worth mentioning that this passage is yet another reference to a global God. In verse 7, His house is considered a house for all peoples, not just the Jews.

<sup>133</sup> During the dedication of the original Temple in First Kings 8:41-43, Solomon states that those who come to the Temple seeking YHWH were to be welcomed. But those coming seeking their own Gods or to defile the Temple were to be rejected. This is an even earlier example of the distinction found here.



they did not adopt Jewish practice and beliefs. These women and their children did not speak the language of Judah, much less follow the religious customs.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, put in their proper context, these two passages reflected the very developments we have been discussing. Rather than offering a contradictory approach to foreigners in their midst, they depicted an identity that was heavily reliant upon religious identity and custom. Further, the Isaiah passage fits well with the sentiments that reflect Cyrus as an anointed king and a global exclusive God. If YHWH was a universal God, it did not make sense for anyone to be excluded. Similarly, Ezra's rejection of foreigners fits alongside his whole mission: to reassert the Law and reconstruct the Jewish way of life. The added specification that those who actually adhere to the ways of the Covenant aided his mission and ensured the reconstruction of an identity with a foundation in the Covenant.

Following Ezra's prayer, the people of Israel separated themselves from the foreigners and had a ceremony and communal confession. This confession and prayer drew heavily upon the story of Moses, the exodus from Egypt, the time spent wandering in the desert, and God's restoration. This evocation was a means of associating themselves with the past. Following the confession the Jews reaffirmed their devotion to the law. This reaffirmation is reminiscent of Josiah's reforms prior to the Exile. The rededication to the Law granted the Jews the title of "people of the book" or similarly Judaism as "the religion of the book."<sup>135</sup> This was a seminal moment in the formation of

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<sup>134</sup> Nehemiah 23:23.

<sup>135</sup> There are some who challenge this as a simplistic or even inaccurate analysis. Lester Grabbe argues that this interpretation of these changes is flawed. "Instead," he says, "Judaism began as and remained a temple religion until the Temple was destroyed for good in 70. The cult was the main form of worship, and for Jews in Palestine within relatively easy reach of Jerusalem to neglect worship at the Temple would have been regarded as a grave omission." However, Grabbe's analysis here seems to be to the

Jewish identity. We have thus far been discussing the significance of literature and stories in the formation of communal identity and peoplehood for the Jews. But it is not until this point that the texts themselves play such a prominent role in Jewish society.

### **Literary Case Studies: Esther and Ruth**

The issue of marriage was also the topic for other post-exilic literature that aided in the reconstruction of identity. Marriage played a prominent role in two Jewish sources from the diaspora: Esther and Ruth. Both of these stories included marriage to a foreigner as a vital component but in vastly different settings. Esther was a Jewish woman chosen to be the Persian king's wife and lived directly in the Persian courts. Ruth, on the other hand, was the story of a foreigner who married a Jew and became King David's grandmother. Both of these stories are historically tenuous at best but their characterization as fictitious only served to increase their importance as evidence of active response to their historical reality. As Adele Berlin pointed out, "to judge a story's historicity by its degree of realism is to mistake verisimilitude for historicity."<sup>136</sup> Esther, according to Berlin was the "illusion of history," an intentional quality that aids in the reconstruction of identity. Esther and Ruth's literary standing as "historical works" despite their fictitious nature is indicative of the triviality of historical accuracy in comparison to the creation of the past.<sup>137</sup>

Establishing the Jews in relation to their past and creating retroactive continuity

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exclusion of the book, which I argue is equally as flawed. In reality, there is a middle ground in which the Temple was still important, vital even, but the idea of the book offered a satisfactory and equally vital foundation in the interim. Lester Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel, and Jesus* (London: T & T Clark International, 2010.) 131.

<sup>136</sup> Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 1 (2001), 4.

<sup>137</sup> Berlin, "The Book of Esther..." 5.

is a theme throughout both these works especially in relation to their ancestors. Both of these books by being presented as historical were granted an authority analogous to books such as First and Second Kings or even Ezra and Nehemiah. Similar to the recreation of history found in these books Esther and Ruth were stories that aided in the development of peoplehood. In this case it is a concept of Jewish identity that was particularly suited to diasporic living.

Esther was a diasporic novel putting Jewish people directly into Persian life. While it highlighted integration and mutual cooperation, Jewish identity was still a strong theme. Esther was a book full of hyperbole, comical events, and relatively unrealistic events. The carnivalesque nature of the story was such that Esther presents an image of the world in which everything has switched places. Esther, a Jew, was the Persian queen. The Jews, Persian subjects, were ordered by the Persian King to fight his own people and win. Mordecai, a Jew, took a Persian court official's place. And the Persian official met his fatal end by the means he himself planned for the Jews. The ridiculous nature of this text was intentional and revealing of a people aware of their status of foreigners yet embracing it alongside their own unique identity. The exaggerations found in the book of Esther illuminated the precarious nature of being a Jew in diaspora.

The first thing to note about the story of Esther was the relationship between identity, ethnicity, and place. The most obvious commentary on this is the simple fact that in this story there exists a Jewish community that clearly identifies together and acts together independently of their Persian counterparts. However, upon being chosen

to appear before the king, Esther was instructed to hide her identity as a Jew.<sup>138</sup> The first half of the book portrayed the Jews as passive and almost fearfully submissive. She entered the king's court and found herself in a position that granted her the power to free her people. Esther's embracing of her Jewish identity, however, brought the whole community freedom and an elevated status.<sup>139</sup> This story painted a picture of Jewishness that was powerful even up against an empire like Persia.

The turning point in Esther comes when Mordecai charged her to intercede on behalf of the Jews. Haman had developed a plot to destroy the Jews, and Esther was the only one in a position to interfere. This meant the possibility of death, and yet Mordechai told her, "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."<sup>140</sup> The direct presence of God was nowhere to be found in the book of Esther. However, His influence permeates the story. This statement by Mordechai indicated the help will come whether or not Esther did what was asked of her. Presumably this help will be orchestrated by God. Similarly, this statement assumes that Esther's position in the court was intentional. The absence of God directly from this story may have been a reflection of the foreign setting. But his presence more discreetly was indicative of His global nature and restorative plans. Esther as a diasporic work reflected the shifting ideologies about identity and their relationship to YHWH in a foreign place, and the use

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<sup>138</sup> Esther 2:10.

<sup>139</sup> Gruen, *Diaspora*, 145. Esther makes the decision to approach the king despite a direct order not to disturb him. She does so in order to save her people from the king's chief official, Haman who was bent on destroying the Jews.

<sup>140</sup> Esther 4:14.

of earthly actors to bring about his restoration, even a foreigner.

The story of Ruth and Boaz dealt with similar themes regarding issues of foreignness, intermarriage, and the essence of Jewish identity. Ruth was a Moabite who married a Jewish man when he and his family fled from Bethlehem Judah to escape famine. Upon her husband's death, Ruth made the decision to return to Judah with her mother-in-law. Her reasons for doing so are perhaps the most quoted passage in this book and the most important. She pled to be allowed to stay with Naomi saying,

Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well  
if even death parts me from you!<sup>141</sup>

Ruth, though not a Jew, made the decision to devote herself to YHWH. Once in Judah, Ruth began working in the fields of a man named Boaz. Eventually Boaz became the kinsman redeemer of Ruth and her mother-in-law, marrying Ruth. Because Ruth was a foreigner, her marriage to Boaz is seemingly counter to Ezra's command to refrain from foreign marriages. However, rather than serve as a point of contradiction to Ezra's reforms, their marriage was an example of how different aspects of Jewish identity were experienced on a more practical level.<sup>142</sup> Ruth fit the description of a foreigner given in Isaiah 56. She embraced the God of the Jews, their Law, and their customs.

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<sup>141</sup> Ruth 1:16-17.

<sup>142</sup> My characterization of this as a "practical" application of the ideologies thus far explored is not to suggest that the story of Ruth is strictly accurate. Rather, similar to Esther, regardless of its historical accuracy it was intended to be read and learned from.

Additionally, Ruth's association with the Jews went beyond YHWH. Boaz's redemption of Ruth was a necessary detail of the story (historically accurate or not) because it put both Boaz and Ruth, a foreigner, in the direct line of both Abraham, and David; a significant detail for anyone trying to establish Jewish identity with any authority.<sup>143</sup> Through her marriage to Boaz, despite being a foreigner, Ruth became the grandmother of king David. This not only lent authority to intermarriage but it once again harkens back to the significance of claiming ancestry as a means of maintaining legitimacy in the present. This was the argument put forth regarding Cyrus' adoption into the Davidic line and it is present again here.

Association with the line of David and the global nature of YHWH are both engaged in this text as a means of reconstructing Jewish identity in the Persian period. But this text also reconnected the people back to YHWH. Boaz' identity as a redeemer was a significant aspect of this story. His granting of *Hesed*, loving kindness, is parallel to YHWH's redemption of Israel. The same word was used in Ezra's prayer when he said, "Lord our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage."<sup>144</sup> Ruth and Naomi fit the description of outsiders in more respects than one. Naomi and her family abandoned Judah and thus YHWH, imitating the Israelites perpetual turning away from the law and the Covenant, embodying the "wandering Jew" motif. When they returned to Judah, they were women, unmarried, propertyless, destitute, and Ruth is a foreigner. By appropriately demonstrating *Hesed* towards Ruth and Naomi, Boaz was in line with the Covenantal commands to care for the widowed

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<sup>143</sup> Ruth 4:17-22.

<sup>144</sup> Ezra 9:8.

and poor, and to not reject foreigners. In Deuteronomy, the Jews were reminded of their own status as foreigners when they were in Egypt.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.<sup>145</sup>

This was to inform their treatment of foreigners in their own midst. Boaz demonstrated this towards Ruth and Naomi and restored them to Covenantal relationship in a similar way that restoration prophecies, such as those in Ezekiel promised for Israel as a whole.

Both Esther and Ruth drew on themes present in diasporic literature. As Berlin states, “The burden of [d]iasporic stories is to provide Jewish continuity in the face of overwhelming dislocation of the Jewish community. A good way to provide this continuity is to link the present with past.”<sup>146</sup> As literature, both of these books linked Jewish identity to something other than land, namely YHWH. The ability to integrate foreigners into their midst and themselves into a benevolent imperial context was a significant quality of these two stories. Persian imperialism was not something to be rejected but rather something to be embraced as an instrument of God’s restoration. These two works reflect those ideas in a way that allowed the Jews to retain their distinctiveness as Jews and still participate in the present world order.

### **Historical Case Study: The Jews in Elephantine**

The Jews, after the Exile, could no longer associate based on political constructions or physical placement. Therefore the changes made to theological

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<sup>145</sup> Deuteronomy 10: 17-20.

<sup>146</sup> Berlin, “The Book of Esther and Storytelling”, 7.

identity were not only intentional but also practical. Some of the most fascinating non-biblical, diasporic Jewish sources are the Elephantine papyri. The papyri, many of them letters, date to the late fifth century BCE, and come from a Jewish military community in Upper Egypt. The nature of the Elephantine colony was somewhat different than the other Jewish communities we have looked at during the Persian period. The Elephantine Jews were distinct to the fact that they were established voluntarily in Egypt and that the community predates the destruction of the First Temple. Elephantine was a military colony with its origins sometime around the reign of Manasseh. These papyri are the only large body of Jewish texts we have from this period outside the Bible and are valuable on that merit alone. However, what makes these texts particularly valuable is that they offer a depiction of everyday life rather than official sacred or memorial texts like those in the Hebrew Bible. Additionally the Elephantine texts were “real time” documents: recording life as it was in the moment rather than constructing a literary image retroactively. This offers insight into the everyday workings of these developing theologies and changing identity. They represent a case study to determine whether Jewish identity existed outside the literature and how it was experienced.

Intermarriages occurred in the Elephantine community much as they occurred in Ezra-Nehemiah. In most cases the Egyptian was adopted into the Jewish family, not the other way around.<sup>147</sup> One of the archives contains documents from a man named Ananiah and his wife Tamut who had been an Egyptian slave and there are several other letters which reference intermarriage between Jews and Egyptians. Given the

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<sup>147</sup> Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, 174;



day-to-day nature of most of these documents, there is little to no discussion of how these circumstances fit into grand ideologies about separation. However, the fact that these marriages existed indicates they were not perceived to be a problem to Jewish identity. The Jews in Elephantine also seemed to conceive of themselves in relation to the broader Jewish community. There was a strong retention of Hebrew names, and continued observance of distinctly Jewish religious practices such as the Sabbath and Passover.

The celebration of both the Sabbath and Passover were significantly tied to the story of the Exodus. This implies that the Jews at Elephantine, despite not having the same exilic experience of other Jewish communities still embraced an exilic identity and the motif of the “wandering Jew.” One of the more significant letters, dated to 419 BCE, dealt with the celebration of Passover. Sent by a Jewish man outside Elephantine, this letter contained instructions with regards to how the Jews in Elephantine were to celebrate the Passover. It is clear that this was not an introduction of Passover celebration since it is mentioned in other, earlier letters.<sup>148</sup> The purpose of this letter could well have been to remind the Jews in Elephantine to keep Passover pure in their diasporic context.<sup>149</sup>

Written following Ezra’s reforms, and from a man some scholars speculate to be Nehemiah’s brother, this Passover letter could be a correctional text crafted to retain

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<sup>148</sup> Bezalel Porten, “The Passover Papyrus, B13 TAD A4.1,” *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 125-126. In an earlier letter dating to 474 BCE, the writer urges his correspondent to “let him know when you will be celebrating the Passover.”

<sup>149</sup> This letter bears resemblance to Mordechai’s letters to the Jews instructing them to celebrate Purim and the letter written to the Jews in Egypt instructing them of the events surrounding Hannukah found in Second Maccabees.

separateness.<sup>150</sup> The imperial approval for the command to celebrate is a notable inclusion. This could imply that the Jews had faced opposition regarding their religious festivals. More likely it was an indication that Hananiah, the author was emphasizing the legitimacy of his letter. Regardless of the reason for the letter, it shows a link between Jews in Egypt and in Jerusalem.

In addition to these religious observances, the Jews at Elephantine constructed their own temple, the presence of which was somewhat unusual.<sup>151</sup> The temple in the Elephantine was built to imitate the specifications for Solomon's temple in First Kings 6. The reasons why the temple was built remain something of a mystery. However, Alejandra Botta and Bezalel Porten both suggest it was constructed in reaction to Manasseh's "paganization of the temple" circa 650.<sup>152</sup> With this explanation this temple could be considered one of the earliest attempts at restoring Jewish identity that predates Josiah's reforms. The fact that this community developed alongside other diasporic communities but had its origin prior to the exile lends significant credibility to this idea. This temple was not constructed after the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians, but rather in response to internal corruption by a Jewish king.

Regardless of its origin, the importance of it in Elephantine community is indisputable. A letter dating to 407 BCE, recounts the razing of this temple and a petition to be allowed to rebuild it. They boast that their "ancestors built that temple in Fort Elephantine back during the time of the kings of Egypt, and when Cambyses came

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<sup>150</sup> Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, 130. James Lindenberger and Kent Harold Richards, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 54-55.

<sup>151</sup> Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, 116-118.

<sup>152</sup> Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, 119; Alejandra Botta, *The Aramaic and Egyptian Legal Traditions at Elephantine*, (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 15.

into Egypt, he found it already built. They pulled down the temples of the Egyptian gods, but no one damaged anything in that temple.”<sup>153</sup> The Temple in this specific community was important to their identity as Jews.

The overarching significance of Elephantine is to illustrate the existence of a somewhat congruent identity and to also note the futility of assuming a dogmatic adherence to such an identity. The literary preservation of Jewish identity in texts such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Ruth represented an ideal. Accepted though their identity may have been, putting it into practice no doubt strayed from perfection, as in Elephantine. It did exist on some level but it was not necessarily monolithic; the Jews were constantly renegotiating their identity which understandably varied in practice despite the literary constructions. In Elephantine there is clear evidence that these Jews viewed themselves as part of a larger Jewish community and the ideals of Jewish identity. They adhered to the Sabbath, celebrated Passover, and believed in YHWH’s presence in his Temple. Broadly speaking their practices of intermarriage resembled Ezra’s attempts at purity and this community even sought for the reconstruction of their Temple. These were markers of their “attachment to His Covenant community,” even in the discrepancies.<sup>154</sup>

The developments during the Persian period followed patterns set during earlier periods. The progression of Jewish identity was an intentional response to both the negative and the positive aspects of subjugation to imperial powers. Regardless of their experience under imperial authority, one aspect remained vital to the Jews: retaining an identity of separation. This intention was reflected in the literature even when

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<sup>153</sup> Porten, “Letter B20,” in *Elephantine Papyri*, 145.

<sup>154</sup> Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, 150.

integration with foreign people became a reality. Stories such as Ruth and Esther revealed integration as a possible reality because identity had been reconstructed around YHWH. This is not to argue that the Temple and the Promised Land had lost their significance. However, they were no longer the sole marker of separation. Cyrus' religious tolerance was key to these developments.

Following the brutal and chaotic Assyrian and Babylonian periods, the Persian period was a bit of a respite for the Jews. Rather than fighting for their identity and retroactively reforming theology to fit the present, Jewish texts reconstructed their identity in response to an imperial authority that did not threaten them. The formation of a God-idea that had its foundations in competition, came to fruition during this period. YHWH was elevated to universal, global, exclusive status. This, along with his association with the Davidic line and Messianic imagery, lent Cyrus a God ordained legitimacy, allowing the Jews to accept him as king. Further, it allowed the Jews to stay in diaspora despite the ability to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

The outcome was an identity that was ideologically more visible and more asserted than it had ever been. Associations with their history and their ancestry coupled with the promise of full restoration by YHWH in the future created a strong identity in the present. Persian imperialism left little for the Jews to fight against, allowing them the chance to reconstruct both the Temple and their identity. The next phase of development was decidedly different, however, as Jewish response moved from reconstruction to rebellion and resistance.

## Chapter Four: Resistance

Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire in 331 BC ushered in the Hellenistic age and the spread of Greek culture. Under Alexander's brief reign, Jewish communities were not subjected to drastic political changes. Alexander left much of the Persian imperial forms of rule in place and even adopted their customs and some of their imperial ideology. Alexander's reign was followed by the wars of the Successors. These were a series of conflicts between family, friends, and generals appointed to rule the different areas of Alexander's empire. By 275 BCE, Alexander's empire was divided into three smaller kingdoms or empires.<sup>155</sup> Judah fell under the Seleucid Empire, and it was under this imperial power we see another shift in Jewish responses to imperialism.

Thus far our analysis has been of internal renegotiation of identity in response to external imperial influences. Under the reign of Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, Jewish identity was more directly influenced and thus required a more direct response. Jewish response thus became one of outright resistance both physically and ideologically. The physical resistance consisted of a full scale revolt against Antiochus known as the Maccabean revolt. This revolt was heavily rooted in the ideological developments that had been in progress since the Jews were first subjected to imperial authority. Previous periods, as I have argued, were characterized by restoration and reconstruction. During the exile and under Persian rule, the Jews had control over the changes they made to their identity. They chose how they maintained their identity even if it meant restructuring some of the core tenets of Judaism. Specifically, thus far we have paid

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<sup>155</sup> The Seleucid Empire was actually established prior to this in 312, but this date marks the final division of Alexander's empire.

special attention to how the Jews redefined their God-idea first to accommodate the Assyrians and Babylonians and then again to accommodate the Persian rule. Similarly they renegotiated their relationship with foreigners to accommodate deportation and then their choice to stay in diaspora.

In this chapter I will be discussing how many of these developments were deployed as a means of supporting a different type of response: resistance. First I will be looking at the origins of physical resistance against Antiochus during the Maccabean revolt and their ideological underpinnings as they compare to previous reactions to imperial power. Next I will turn my attention to literary portrayals of other kings juxtaposed against those of Antiochus in the aftermath of the revolt. The legend of a meeting between Alexander the Great and the Jewish High Priest, and the presentation of the book of Daniel were constructed to draw a stark comparison with Antiochus IV who was conversely portrayed as an abomination.<sup>156</sup> This anachronistic memory of a benevolent line of kings including Cyrus, Darius, Alexander is not in and of itself an act of resistance against Antiochus IV's reign but it aided in the Jewish legitimization of their resistance. According to this view, Antiochus IV broke with tradition. He did not honor their God the way his predecessors did and threatened core pieces of their religious identity. Finally, I will look at the book of Daniel as a work of resistance literature.

### **From Internal Conflict to Imperial Intervention**

When discussing the Maccabean revolt as both a response to imperialism and as

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<sup>156</sup> By legend I mean that the recording of this is event is fictional and written significantly after the events supposedly took place. But this specific memory is significant despite its inaccuracies because of what it reveals about the formation of Jewish identity aided by the story's intentional creation.

a seminal moment in the formation of Jewish identity, the events leading up to the revolt are perhaps most significant. The revolt itself was the result of two different developments within Judah; an internal conflict that arose as a result of Hellenism, and a reaction to that event by Antiochus. Following Alexander's campaigns, Hellenism was a new cultural ideology to the ancient Near East. In the wake of his expansion, Hellenism entered ancient Near Eastern urban centers where Hellenistic kings, such as Alexander, had the intent of creating Greek *poleis*. Hellenistic culture included physical spaces such as gymnasia and socio-political concepts such as citizenship, all of which celebrated Hellenic ideology.<sup>157</sup>

The Maccabean revolt has long been assumed to be the result of a clash between Judaism and Hellenism. However, in a seminal work by Gruen, he proposed that Hellenism and Judaism were not incompatible or opposing; Hellenism was not inherently threatening to Judaism.<sup>158</sup> To argue that Hellenism and Judaism were completely incompatible is to ignore the centuries of Jews living in non-Jewish milieus and still managing to live peacefully and retain their identity. To strike this kind of comparison between the two is futile, because it disregards that Hellenism and Judaism were fundamentally different entities not just differing ideologies. Hellenism is a cultural term, whereas Judaism is also a religious one. Both have ideological, cultural, and religious elements, but until a Hellenistic king impeded the religious elements of the Jewish way of life, conflict was at bay and Hellenism was even largely accepted. In fact, after the Maccabean revolt, "the Hasmoneans advertised their regime as one that

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<sup>157</sup> Neither Hellenism nor Judaism lend themselves to singular definitions. Variations existed over time and space. Broadly speaking Hellenism refers to traditions born out of Greek culture and Judaism refers to the culture and religion born out of Israel/Judea.

<sup>158</sup> Gruen. *Heritage and Hellenism*, xiv-xv.

absorbed the ways of the Greeks and worked within the traditions of the Jews.”<sup>159</sup>

Despite its acceptance on a cultural level, the presence of Hellenism in Jerusalem did cause divisions in Jewish society. Some Jews embraced Hellenism at the expense of religious practice resulting in internal conflict. Those Jews will be referred to as Hellenistic Jews while those who opposed them will be referred to as traditional Jews.<sup>160</sup>

First and Second Maccabees are two of the main accounts of the events leading up to the revolt and the revolt itself. Both of these works have a definitive anti-Hellenistic tone making it appear as though the Jews rejected Hellenism from the very beginning. However, this was a result of being composed after the events took place. These texts serve as a means of creating retroactive continuity, much in the same way that the texts in chapter two did. In the aftermath of the Maccabean Revolt, Antiochus was the face of Hellenism. The hatred of him and his reign translates in the literature as hatred of Hellenism as a whole. However, as mentioned above, the Jews were not actually averse to all aspects of Hellenism prior to his reign. Regardless, the retroactive nature of the texts resulted in the presentation of all Hellenism as an abomination, just like Antiochus.

Shortly after the accession of Antiochus, Jason, the brother of the High Priest, successfully bribed Antiochus to allow him to assume the position of High Priest. He

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<sup>159</sup> Gruen, *Jews and Greeks*, 269-270. The Hasmonean Dynasty was a semi-independent Jewish government in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt led by Simon Maccabeus. During this period, the Jews once again had a Jewish leader independent of Seleucid rule.

<sup>160</sup> This is not to imply that even within these categories there was total continuity. The story of the High Priests Jason and Menelaus are a clear indication that even two Hellenistic Jews were not always in accordance. Similarly, Traditional Jew does not necessarily indicate someone who has strictly adhered to any one specific idea of Judaism. Mostly this refers to those who, later, opposed the Hellenistic Jews. Thus, my earlier assertion that simple definitions do not exist still holds true, and broad categories are utilized for the purposes of analysis.



proceeded to Hellenize the city of Jerusalem by building a gymnasium, established a *polis*, “and he destroyed the lawful ways of living and introduced new customs contrary to the law.”<sup>161</sup> By creating a polis in Jerusalem, Jason was essentially looking for ways to further control the political scene. Some years later another Jew, Menelaus succeeded in out bribing Jason and assumed his post as High Priest. However, having failed to pay the tribute he promised, Menelaus stole vessels from the temple to finance his debt. Menelaus remained in office until Jason, who had fled Jerusalem, returned with an army attempting to overthrow Menelaus and regain control of Jerusalem.<sup>162</sup>

This skirmish between Jason and Menelaus was an internal struggle over Jewish identity. Both men were Hellenistic Jews, but it was not their Hellenism that was issue. It was their violation of a sacred position and the Temple, and it was their association with Antiochus. The texts villainize both men along side Antiochus and subsequently Hellenism is also villainized. But only in so far as they violated Jewish religious identity. The author of Second Maccabees clearly takes issue “that there was an extreme of Hellenization and increase in foreign ways,” but the defilement of the Priesthood, the Temple, and the Law were the crux of the matter.<sup>163</sup> Jason and Menelaus both adopted Hellenistic practices into Judean society, but according to the Maccabees, this did not receive significant resistance from the Jews initially. The existence of the gymnasium for example was not met with widespread resistance even among traditional Jews. What the people did react to was the violation of the Priesthood, the defilement of the Temple, and the murder of the man who accused Menelaus of stealing from the

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<sup>161</sup> 2 Maccabees 4:7-11.

<sup>162</sup> 2 Maccabees 5:5-7.

<sup>163</sup> 2 Maccabees 3: 1; 4:13-17.

Temple.<sup>164</sup>

The challenge that Jason and Menelaus posed to had less to do with the acceptance of Hellenism and more to do with specific violations of Jewish customs. Both appealed to an external, political figure to manipulate what had always been an internal, sacred position. Bribing their way into the High Priesthood shows a shift in perspective that was decidedly Hellenistic and opportunistic. The Jews in Judah had, up to this point, little issue with the institution of Hellenistic culture inside Judah. The gymnasium for example was not met with significant opposition. Jason and Menelaus both violated a sacred position and Menelaus took his Hellenizing tendencies one step further and impinged upon a sacred space, the Temple. Both Jason and Menelaus are considered to be Hellenistic Jews and they embraced Hellenistic culture for their own political gain. Thus, Hellenism did cause some undeniable internal tension especially surrounding the issue of the Temple and, thus religious life more broadly. The internal conflict between Jason and Menelaus was not between Judaism and Hellenism. Rather it was between two Hellenistic Jews, one of whom directly compromised elements of Jewish identity that had been centuries in the making. Jews of this era were not opposed to Hellenism and the ways in which it might physically transform their city, but instead to the ways in which aspects of it challenged their identity.

Though both men were rendered unfavorably in the texts, Menelaus' actions were met with considerable opposition from the people, unlike Jason. Regarding the riots against Menelaus, Grabbe says we need to "keep in mind that those who rioted

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<sup>164</sup> 2 Maccabees 4:32-38 Again, I would like to reiterate that the characterization of Jason and Menelaus as Hellenistic, and therefore villainous, was a later construction heavily influenced by the Jewish experience under Antiochus.

were the citizens of Jerusalem, not some 'pious' gathering from the countryside. They seem to have been Jason's people..."<sup>165</sup> Those who opposed Menelaus did not necessarily oppose Jason in the same way. Both men propagated Hellenistic culture within Judah; the difference, however, was that Menelaus directly affected Jewish identity in a way that Jason did not. Jason's actions were more strictly social and political. The gymnasium and becoming a *polis* were not antithetical to being Jewish, whereas defiling the temple, as Menelaus did, was a direct attack on the core of Jewish identity. Thus, this internal conflict was not between Judaism and Hellenism. It was between two Hellenistic Jews seeking political authority and prestige.

When Jason marched on Jerusalem, Antiochus, the Seleucid King, interpreted this as a rebellion. After all, Jason was seeking to depose the High Priest personally appointed by Antiochus himself.<sup>166</sup> Upon his entry into Jerusalem, Antiochus "commanded his soldiers to cut down relentlessly everyone they met and to kill those who went into their houses."<sup>167</sup> The massacre that followed spared no one, including the women, children, and elderly; and those who were not destroyed were sold into slavery. However,

Not content with this, Antiochus dared to enter the most holy temple in all the world, guided by Menelaus, who had become a traitor both to the laws and to his country. He took the holy vessels with his polluted hands, and swept away with profane hands the votive offerings that other kings had made to enhance the glory and honor of the place.<sup>168</sup>

Aside from the massacre, Antiochus was doing something that even Jews did not do:

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<sup>165</sup> Lester Grabbe, "The Hellenistic City of Jerusalem," *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*, ed. John Bartlett, (London: Routledge, 2002): 6-21.

<sup>166</sup> 2 Maccabees 5:5-11.

<sup>167</sup> 2 Maccabees 5:11-14.

<sup>168</sup> 2 Maccabees 5:15-16. Antiochus is subtly compared to other kings in the last statement. It compares Antiochus' actions with those of previously amiable and respectful kings such as his father Antiochus III and Cyrus the Great of Persia. This is a point we will return to later in the chapter.

enter the inner parts of the Temple. Perceiving Jewish religion to be a threat to his power, Antiochus joined forces with Menelaus, the traitorous Jew, and invaded Jerusalem. By attacking the Temple, Antiochus directly attacked the heart of Jewish identity in a way not unlike the Assyrians and the Babylonians. But Antiochus did not stop with the Temple.

Antiochus issued a decree forbidding the adherence to Judaism and exclusively enforcing the Greek way of life. The author of Second Maccabees said,

Not long after this, the king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their ancestors and no longer to live by the laws of God; also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and to call it the temple of Olympian Zeus, and to call the one in Gerizim the temple of Zeus-the-Friend-of-Strangers, as did the people who lived in that place.

Harsh and utterly grievous was the onslaught of evil. For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with prostitutes and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit. The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the laws. People could neither keep the sabbath, nor observe the festivals of their ancestors, nor so much as confess themselves to be Jews.<sup>169</sup>

This intervention and decree by Antiochus began what Portier-Young called Antiochus' "program of terror."<sup>170</sup> Religious life was particularly targeted. Antiochus forbid festivals, circumcision, and adherence to the law.<sup>171</sup> Antiochus' armies attacked anyone who rejected these decrees, and murdered through torture any who maintained devotion to the Jewish Law.<sup>172</sup> The author of Second Maccabees was intent on highlighting that Antiochus directly attacked, religious life, the Temple, and the Law:

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<sup>169</sup> 2 Maccabees 5:15-16, 6:1-6.

<sup>170</sup> Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 140.

<sup>171</sup> 1 Maccabees 1:44-50.

<sup>172</sup> 1 Maccabees 1:56-64; 2 Maccabees 6:10. The brutality with which the Jews were treated is reminiscent of the psychological aspect to Assyrian warfare. The Maccabees describe specifically the treatment of women and their circumcised babies who were killed hanging from their mothers necks or publicly thrown down from the wall.

key elements to Jewish identity. In this way, Antiochus' actions were unprecedented. Unlike the Assyrians and the Babylonians, Antiochus sought to actually force the Jews to conform to the Greek way of life. To Antiochus, their otherness from the rest of the Hellenistic world was what made them a perceived threat and was embodied in their religion.

Prior to Antiochus, Jewish religion was relatively inconsequential to imperial programs as long as tribute was satisfied. For the Jews, as long as their religious freedom was maintained, then submission to imperial power could be ideologically accommodated by renegotiating their identity. Previous responses to imperialism resulted in the reinforcement of the importance of the Law and YHWH as a means of maintaining the separateness their diasporic existence had compromised. The ideological strengthening of that reframed identity ensured a relatively peaceful life as imperial subjects.

In the two chapters prior to this one, I established that Jewish identity had been intentionally reframed to accommodate the lack of a temple and even embrace a diasporic existence. The events happening in Jerusalem undoubtedly were more significant to the Jews in Jerusalem than they were to diasporic Jews. However, even though their identity had been reframed to accommodate the lack of the Temple, the Temple never lost its symbolic significance. Second Maccabees was a letter written to diasporic Jews in Egypt reminding them of these events and indicating that by the second century CE these events were significant for Jews both in and out of Jerusalem. The letter associated diasporic Jews with Jerusalem keeping them connected to the

Temple and life in Jerusalem. It reframes identity around community and a central idea in the ways I have been arguing throughout this project.

Just as Antiochus' actions towards the Jews were unprecedented, Jewish response to Antiochus' imperialism took a new form. Rather than respond by reframing their identity yet again to accommodate this new imperialism, which may have been impossible, the Jews used their identity to support a revolutionary resistance. It is important to reiterate that this was not a rebellion against imperialism in general. Jews, especially under the Persians, had lived relatively peacefully with their imperial counterparts. However, Seleucid imperial ideology under Antiochus IV was a departure from its predecessors, particularly in its understanding and treatment of subjected peoples. Antiochus' threat was decidedly more existential than previous threats. Numismatic iconography under Antiochus no longer depicted just a king or even a king by divine appointment but he was himself a conquering god. Antiochus IV "and his successors shared none of their forebears' qualms about promoting their own divinity as a god incarnate on royal coin issues."<sup>173</sup> This was a distinct departure from Cyrus' practice of respecting local deities and even co-opting them into his own pantheon. Antiochus' actions here more closely resemble the Assyrian and the Babylonian periods but his ideology was a departure even from them. Assyrians and Babylonians relied on divine justification for their rule, where as Antiochus seemed to reject it in favor of power that came directly from him. Antiochus substituted himself for divine authority.

The Jewish response to Antiochus, though decidedly different, was not altogether uncharacteristic or radical. In the previous periods as discussed in chapters

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<sup>173</sup> Nicholas L. Wright, "Seleucid Royal Cult, Indigenous Religious Traditions, and Radiate Crowns: the Numismatic Evidence." *Mediterranean Archaeology Vol. 18*. (2005), 72.

two and three, Jewish identity was revised to create retroactive continuity in response to changing imperial contexts. The two developments discussed most explicitly have been the immersion of a monotheistic and global God-idea and the reconstruction and reassertion of the Law as a means of identity and cohesion across the diaspora. During the internal conflict between Jason and Menelaus, these fundamentals of Jewish identity were beginning to be attacked from the inside. Their religious identity was under threat by Jews who embraced Hellenistic culture in religious spaces. Antiochus took this threat further: he did not just corrupt Jewish religious life, he outright forbid it. Jewish identity had become a prominent source of strength for the Jews, something Antiochus saw as a threat. The reconstruction process in which the Jews had participated during previous imperial regimes made their resistance both necessary and possible.

### **A Faith Worth Dying for is a Faith Worth Killing for**

One of the most dynamic and rhetorically significant elements in the story of the Maccabean revolt is the martyrdom of an elderly man named Eleazar, and of a Jewish mother and her seven sons. In both these stories and in others like them, it is significant to note that those dying for their faiths were just the elite; they were the old, the young, the women and the children. The people dying for their faith were not the religious leaders like Menelaus and Jason; they were average people. The stories of martyrdom serve a double purpose. First these stories exemplify the strength of Jewish identity and the ways in which it was employed under threat of an imperial regime. In choosing death for the sake of their faith, the Jews actively engaged with their identity. This was significantly different than succumbing to death at the hands of the empire. Secondly, these stories served as a literary device intended for instruction; an assertion

of Jewish identity for future generations.

Eleazar was a scribe who was “advanced in age and of noble presence.”<sup>174</sup> After refusing to eat sacrificed pork he willingly gave himself to punishment by death. Even those who were overseeing the sacrifice attempted to reason with him so he would not face death, but “according to the holy God-given law, he declared himself quickly, telling them to send him to Hades.”<sup>175</sup> Eleazar’s declaration was one of establishing the Law as supreme in all circumstances and YHWH as king not just of this life but also of the next. He went of his own accord to his death, “leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but also to the great body of his nation.”<sup>176</sup> The guards overseeing the events offered him a way out by replacing the meat with his own meat, still Eleazar refused. Despite being in line with the Law if he did such a thing, he responded saying, “Such a pretense is not worthy of our time of life... for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion.”<sup>177</sup> That Eleazar made the choice of death is significant. He died a martyr because he died on his own terms, actively engaging in his identity as a Jew, even under a regime of terror. The active nature of Eleazar’s choice was meant to be learned from and have lasting impact on the young and his people as a whole.

The next major story of martyrdom is the story of a mother and her seven sons. Similar to Eleazar, this family refused to eat unclean meat from a sacrifice. As they faced death one by one, each brother offered a speech asserting his choice to die. The speeches given by each of the brothers contained several challenges to Antiochus’

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<sup>174</sup> 2 Maccabees 6:18.

<sup>175</sup> 2 Maccabees 6:23.

<sup>176</sup> 2 Maccabee 6:31.

<sup>177</sup> 2 Maccabee 6:24.



authority. Along with these challenges they propagated solidifying sentiments regarding Jewish identity under YHWH and as a unified people in spite of Antiochus' attempts to destroy them.

The first challenge to his authority was drawing a comparison between Antiochus' power and the sovereignty of YHWH. The second brother with his last breath said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws."<sup>178</sup> This brother compared Antiochus with "King of the Universe," in order to delegitimize the king's power. The fifth brother issued a similar statement, claiming that, "Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!"<sup>179</sup> The brothers challenged Antiochus by reasserting YHWH as sovereign and even replacing his power with that of YHWH's. This challenge deployed the strong belief in a monotheistic God with a global reach developed during the Assyrian and the Persian periods. The development of a worldwide monotheistic God as part of their identity formed the foundation for this challenge to Antiochus. Just as YHWH was king over Cyrus, he was king over Antiochus, whether Antiochus chose to recognize it or not.

The second challenge to his authority was to deny the finality of death in light of resurrection and future restoration.<sup>180</sup> To refer again to the second and fifth brother's speeches, both readily admitted Antiochus' power on earth and thus his ability to

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<sup>178</sup> 2 Maccabees 7:9.

<sup>179</sup> 2 Maccabees 7:16-17.

<sup>180</sup> Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 25.

destroy body and “this present life.”<sup>181</sup> However, for the brothers this was of little consequence given the promise of eternal life and a future restoration. This future of resurrection is reminiscent of the prophecies of restoration and the reliance. The reliance on a promised future was a quality of identity first discussed following the Exile with restoration prophecies such as Ezekiel discussed in chapter two. Claiming resurrection was a challenge to Antiochus’ authority because it highlighted the temporary nature of his reign and kingdom in contrast to the eternity to which he was sending them. Thus, Antiochus was inadvertently doing them a favor in allowing them full communion with their God, a long awaited union. By causing them to die for the sake of their God and their Law, Antiochus was actually granting them an honor and enhancing their Jewish identity.

The third challenge issued by the brothers subjected Antiochus to the will of God, not just as a subordinate in terms of power, but actually as a part of YHWH’s will for His chosen people, the Jews. The sixth brother said, “Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things have happened. But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!”<sup>182</sup> This claim was redolent of the retroactive continuity discussed above in chapter two. Just as they rewrote their past to explain the Assyrian brutality and the Babylonian Exile, this brother ascribed the current situation to a past action in an attempt to fit it into his identity as a Jew. This brother claimed that the king’s actions as part of a plan that had little to do with

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<sup>181</sup> 2 Maccabees 7:9.

<sup>182</sup> 2 Maccabees 7:18-19. This sentiment is also repeated in the more lengthy speech given by the youngest brother discussed below.

Antiochus himself and everything to do with the Jews and their God. Antiochus' actions were not his own, they were part of the will of God for His chosen ones.

Taken together, these challenges highlight the strength of the Jewish identity as it had developed in response to imperial authority in the periods prior to this. They deploy a strong reliance on a universal, monotheistic God whose power extended over a foreign king. They also depend on the ability to use their past, or create their past in an effort to explain their present. Antiochus' imperial ideology worked against these aspects of identity. He attempted to elevate himself above the gods as evidenced by his removal of them from Seleucid coinage as mentioned above. He willingly interfered in Jewish religious life for political purposes attempting to supersede the power of YHWH. Antiochus own motivations were undoubtedly political rather than religious, but that is in large part what made his actions so abominable to the Jews and their identity. Their identity was based in their religion and when that religion was threatened through his desolation of the Temple and his anti-Jewish decrees, the Jews were left with no choice but to rebel. And the rebellion was made possible by their strengthened sense of Jewish identity.

Despite taking place in Jerusalem these martyr deaths served to emphasize a communal identity bound by God's sovereignty even in diaspora. The death of the innocent individual was of consequence to the whole community. The final brother repeated much of what his elder brothers said and concluded,

What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our ancestors through Moses. But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. But you,

unholy wretch, you most defiled of all mortals, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's Covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.<sup>183</sup>

This young man succeeded in bringing together all of the ideological tenets of Jewish identity in one final challenge to Antiochus. He asserted the Law of his ancestors as superior to the rule of the king dethroning him. He cited Antiochus' crime as causing the Jews to break the Covenant with his edicts and the choice of death as the restoration to the Covenant granting agency to the Jews. And finally he reasserted the power of YHWH by claiming that death at the hands of Antiochus was a demonstration that Antiochus recognized the power of YHWH alone. The Jews had a faith and a God that was powerful and strong enough to only be quieted by death. However, for the Jews, that death acted as a unifying force that fed further resistance.

This moment, regardless of the historicity of these specific events, is significant in showing the development of Judean theological identity. The deaths of these martyrs show the development of a faith worth dying for and the revolt as a whole demonstrates a faith worth killing for. As Jan Assmann argues, martyrdom and zealotry of this period are inextricably linked to religion. He calls the Maccabean revolt, "The first purely religiously motivated war, which is to say the first religious war in which

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<sup>183</sup> 2 Maccabees 7: 30-38.

human beings were killed in the name of the true God and His Laws.”<sup>184</sup> The existential nature of Antichus’ threats made this a religious war in a way that previous rebellions had not been. Zealotry and martyrdom were two new elements of Jewish response that developed during this period but both reflected the same process that has driven every other ideological response to imperialism discussed in this project. Though in some ways they are opposites, dying for your faith and killing for your faith are both predicated upon having a faith strong enough to stand against these threats and worth preserving at any cost.

Mattathias was the quintessential model for a Jewish zealot from this period. After Seleucid persecution had begun, Mattathias refused to sacrifice to the Greek gods and killed the Jew who stepped forward in his place.<sup>185</sup> Refusing to make the sacrifice, Mattathias made similar claims to those of the martyr speeches saying,

Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to obey his commandments, every one of them abandoning the religion of their ancestors, I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the Covenant of our ancestors. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left... Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the Covenant come out with me!<sup>186</sup>

Mattathias’ response called for his fellow Jews to remember the Law, their ancestors, and enforced a sense of otherness from other peoples under Antiochus’ rule.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Jan Assmann, "Martyrdom, Violence, and Immortality: The Origins of a Religious Complex." *Dying for the Faith, Killing for the Faith*, ed. by Gabriela Signori (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 39-59.

<sup>185</sup> 1 Maccabees 2:22-26.

<sup>186</sup> 1 Maccabees 2:19-22.

<sup>187</sup> The threat that Antiochus posed was not as political as it was religious. From the Jewish perspective, though Antiochus actions certainly were political to some degree, Judah was a “religiously defined and politically organized community, under the rule of law as codified divine rule.” Thus, religion was the foundation for even their political identity. Assmann, *Martyrdom...*, 50.

That Mattathias' first victim was a fellow Jew should not be overlooked. The nature of such a strict adherence to the Law led to the paradoxical decision to break it. The Law clearly forbids acts such as murder and work on the Sabbath. Yet, both of these were done in the name of preserving the Law. Antiochus and his regime represented an existential threat that had also infiltrated the inner workings of Jewish society, thus those who betrayed the Law from the inside could hardly be considered Jews and were treated accordingly.

Accounts of martyrdom and zealotry have merit as historical phenomena that represented Jewish response to both imperialism and internal conflict. The Maccabees, as works of history of course should be taken critically. As a works of literature, the Maccabees are even more significant. They not only recorded acts of resistance to imperial rule, they also preserved them, thus becoming resistance literature themselves. Other literary works reflected similar sentiments as the speeches given by martyrs in attempts to assert Jewish identity and the power of YHWH over Antiochus' power. One way this was accomplished was through literature that placed Antiochus in contrast to kings that had come before him. These texts, such as Josephus' histories and the book of Daniel, were composed with a post-Antiochus world view in which resistance to empire and the need to assert oneself was necessary for survival.

### **Images of Alexander**

As seen above, a persistent method of resisting Antiochus was to dethrone him. The martyrs tended to place him in juxtaposition to YHWH, but comparing him to previous kings was also a prominent and effective means of resistance. Ideas of kingship that developed in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt successfully demoted

Antiochus IV to a status significantly below that of Cyrus, Alexander the Great, and Antiochus' own father Antiochus III. Just as the Maccabees served as resistance literature, portrayals of kings served a similar purpose; specifically the retelling of Alexander's interactions with Jews. The most famous legend regarding the conquest of Judea by Alexander was written by Josephus in the first century CE, about a century after the Maccabean Revolt.

Alexander was recorded as saluting the Jewish High Priest, showing a respect and a reverence unexpected by all those present. When asked by his companion why he had shown such veneration for the High Priest when those present worshiped Alexander himself, he replied, "I did not adore him, but that God who hath honored him with his high priesthood."<sup>188</sup> According to this legend, Alexander acknowledged and claimed the power of YHWH and granted the Jews the ability to follow in the traditions of their forefathers. This account of Alexander's actions closely resembled those of Cyrus himself and stood in stark contrast to those of Antiochus IV.

Despite the imaginative nature of this account, this moment represented an important part of Alexander's imperial ideology that previous kings embodied. Specifically he demonstrates a concept of kingship that exists alongside a willingness to recognize his subjects' social, political and religious autonomy. Historically, Alexander recognized the quality of Persian rule for establishing his own reign. He adopted Persian custom and dress, and set out not just to conquer Darius, but also to become the next Darius. He adopted the Persian title of the Great King elevating himself to their status. Alexander's actions reflected a strong sense of kingship that influenced his

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<sup>188</sup> Josephus, AJ 11.8.5.

actions and imperial exploits. His idealization of Cyrus and Darius led him to emulate their styles of rule.

In First Maccabees, Alexander was mentioned by name as the king who “put to death the kings of the earth. He advanced to the ends of the earth, and plundered many nations. When the earth became quiet before him, he was exalted and his heart was lifted up.”<sup>189</sup> This description of Alexander, his rise, and his death is rather short, only about seven verses, but it is in stark contrast to the rulers after his death. He is elevated to an almost godlike state here but the officers and their sons who replaced him “caused many evils on the earth. From them came forth a sinful root, Anti’ochus Epiph’anes.”<sup>190</sup> Here, Alexander is juxtaposed against Antiochus as the good king ruling over what could be considered a golden age.

In the story Josephus tells, Alexander was actually presented with the book of Daniel, which contained prophecy depicting Alexander’s triumph over Persia.<sup>191</sup> Alexander, or more accurately his kingdom, appears in the book of Daniel as a figure in dreams. His kingdom was placed in a succession of four different kingdoms, and though never mentioned by name, Alexander’s empire is described in a number of ways. In one of the visions, Alexander and his kingdom are depicted as a goat with a great horn. The goat defeats a ram with two horns and grows exceedingly great. At the height of its power, however, its horn breaks and four smaller ones grow. Alexander was the goat and the ram he defeats represented Persia. The breaking of the one horn was Alexander’s death and the four smaller horns that replace it represented his successors.

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<sup>189</sup> 1 Maccabees 1:2-3.

<sup>190</sup> 1 Maccabees 1:9-10.

<sup>191</sup> Josephus, *AJ*, 11.8.5; Daniel 7:6; 8:3-8, 20--22; 11:3



This passage was a description of the succession of kingdoms but it is also rhetorically significant. Alexander's kingdom was prophesied to be all-powerful in a book by Jewish authors placing it in contrast to Antiochus kingdom. While glorifying Alexander, Jewish authors degraded Antiochus reign both on its own merit and in comparison to Alexander's.

Historically, for the Jews Alexander did nothing exceptional. However, the crafting of these stories in the aftermath of Antiochus' reign of terror were intentionally designed to draw a contrast between Antiochus and his predecessors. Alexander, likely due to his global impact through the spread of Hellenism was a prominent point of comparison. Some Jewish sources, like Josephus', elevated Alexander to high status comparable to that of their messianic depictions of Cyrus. Other accounts paid little attention except to put him in contrast to other more negative rulers and kingdoms such as Antiochus. These depictions of Alexander had little to do directly with him and far more to do with Antiochus.

That Alexander was presented with the book of Daniel was an intentional detail of the story. In addition to prophesying Alexander's triumph over Persia, Daniel included less than subtle references to Antiochus' reign and the power of God. Josephus' inclusion of this detail was double faceted. As we have already discussed, it helped place Alexander in juxtaposition to Antiochus, reminding the reader of how horrible Antiochus was. Thus, the telling of this story was in and of itself a subtle act of rebellion against imperial power. Perhaps more significant, however, is the nature rest of the book of Daniel as a piece of resistance literature.

## **The Book of Daniel**

Apocalyptic literature was a form of imperial resistance, and a manifestation of solidifying Jewish religious identity. It drew upon on scriptural traditions for legitimacy and much like the martyrs in the Maccabees it challenged ideas of sovereign earthly kingship. Apocalyptic literature tended to depict a world in which the sovereignty of God was emphasized, delegitimizing the rule of the king and elevating the role of the chosen people. The book of Daniel was one such work that contains apocalyptic themes as imperial resistance. Not only were its themes anti-imperial, but the very existence of Daniel as a work of literature was in and of itself a form of resistance.

Daniel was a book meant to be taught and its lessons were meant to be acted upon. Its stories did not merely represent a way of life but they instructed Jews under Antiochus' edicts how to respond. Roughly the first half of Daniel consists of court tales similar to those found in Esther. Its setting was the Babylonian court where Daniel was in service to the king and maintained a good status despite opposition. These stories related a world in which Jews had to co-exist with an unpredictable imperial power. The stories of acts of resistance by Daniel and his friends were paired with an apocalyptic work in the second half.

There were three main acts of resistance in the first half of the book that resembled those in the Maccabees. In chapter one Daniel and his companions were given royal rations of food and wine but refused to eat it lest they defile themselves. Instead, they persuaded the guard to give them only vegetables and water for ten days to prove that they would be just as healthy as those who consumed the royal rations. Of course, they were even healthier than the men receiving full rations revealing that God's

way was better than the empire's.<sup>192</sup> As a result "to these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams."<sup>193</sup> The refusal to eat unclean food was an affirmation of Jewish Law and the same challenge posed to the martyrs in the Maccabees. For Daniel and his friends though, the situation did not escalate to death. Instead refusing to eat unclean food was a means of resisting imperial power with a more positive outcome. Their faithfulness to the law and reliance on God not only elevated YHWH and his ways, it also granted the Jews a better relationship to Him through knowledge and wisdom.

In a second act of resistance Daniel's companions refused to worship a golden statue and were thrown into a furnace. When presented a final chance to escape death they responded,

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.<sup>194</sup>

Again, this response resembled those of the seven brothers discussed above. In addition to outright resistance by refusing to bow, this speech challenged Nebuchadnezzar's authority with the sovereignty of God. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego made public declarations of their faith, defying the king in a way that resembled the martyrs' defiance of Antiochus in Second Maccabees. Very simply, they claimed the power of God over that of Nebuchadnezzar. His power alone was reason enough to defy the king and face death. After being thrown into the furnace they were preserved by the presence of

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<sup>192</sup> Daniel 1:7-16

<sup>193</sup> Daniel 1:17

<sup>194</sup> Daniel 4:16-18

an angel: a temporal alternative to the eternal life claimed by the martyrs.

The third act of resistance was Daniel's refusal to stop praying even when decreed by the king. This act was especially significant because it is the only of the three that responded to a decree that intentionally targeted the Jews. After Darius the Mede defeated Babylon he set Daniel into a position of power over one of the three sections of his kingdom. His rise to this position was cause for discontent among the other satraps, and they searched for a means of deposing him. However, they were unsuccessful at first.

Daniel 6:5-6 says,

[They] tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. The men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God."<sup>195</sup>

The fact that the satraps could find no fault with Daniel in respect to his rule shows that integration with non-Jewish societies on a political and social level was not an impossible thing for a Jew. This we saw reflected in the integration of Hellenistic culture in Judah during the Maccabees and even earlier in the story of Esther and Mordechai who both held positions in the imperial court.

Since Daniel was faultless in this respect, the satraps had to look elsewhere. They were aware of the unalterable nature of Jewish law and more significantly, they understood the necessity of adhering to it. As the story continues, the satraps convinced the king to put a ban on worship of any God other than the king himself. Daniel, of course, continued to pray condemning himself under the law of the land. It is worth noting here that that Daniel did not change his practice at all. He could easily have been

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<sup>195</sup> Daniel 6:5-6

less conspicuous in his prayers thus escaping notice. However, “he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.”<sup>196</sup> In this act, Daniel’s actions could be compared to Eleazar’s in Second Maccabees. Both men could have continued to follow the law and still escape punishment. Yet both chose the most public means of asserting their decision and suffering the consequence. For Daniel, this meant being thrown into a den of lions. Due to his faithfulness, however, Daniel was unharmed and the king humbled himself to the power of Daniel’s God claiming, “For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end.”<sup>197</sup>

These three stories of resistance in Daniel all emphasized the necessity of relying on God, the importance of adhering to the Law, and non-violent resistance to imperial control. In all three cases the Jews were spared because of their faithfulness and in two of the three cases the king even acknowledged YHWH’s power as a result of their resistance. By encouraging resistance to imperialism by simply following the Law, Daniel taught that YHWH honored those actions.

In addition to stories of resistance, the book of Daniel was itself a form of resistance. In all three stories of resistance above, knowledge or wisdom was a key theme. In this book, knowledge was, among other connotations, equivalent to knowing and following the Law, something that would bring victory to the Jews in the face of imperial opposition. Portier-Young said,

Right knowledge is a precondition for right action, and its publication is

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<sup>196</sup> Daniel 6:10.

<sup>197</sup> Daniel 6:25.

therefore a key component of resistance (witness the book of Daniel itself.) To 'know God' is to know what God will do, to know that God is sovereign, to know God's commitment to God's people, and to know what God requires of them in turn. Knowledge of God strengthens the people and empowers them to remain steadfast in their Covenant faith.<sup>198</sup>

In other words, knowledge of God and acting within that knowledge ensured a God-ordained outcome. Even when facing imperial wrath, what better means of ensuring a victory than doing exactly what the God of the universe ordained?

The first half of Daniel was written most likely during the Persian period, a time when the religious identity of the Jews was in their own control. The stories in this half reflected Persian life and the ability of Jews to incorporate into that world and still retain their identity. Within the first half of Daniel's narrative, knowledge and the Law led the Jews to a peaceful co-existence with the imperial power. Daniel and his companions were even able to hold political office and maintain their Jewishness provided they continued to uphold the Law. Resistance was only necessary when their Law was threatened and thus their Covenant with God. This was the case when Daniel and his friends refused the sacrificial meat and when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego maintained the law and refused to bow. It was equally true when even the Persian rulers understood that Daniel could only be condemned upon violation of his own God's law. These stories in the first part of Daniel served a double purpose. They were stories of resistance based upon knowledge and adherence to the law intended to instruct those who read it to follow suit. Secondly they were stories instructing when resistance was necessary and that it was not always violent, a point which the book of Daniel itself reinforces. In these stories resisting the empire was as simple as remaining steadfast in

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<sup>198</sup> Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 235.

their faith.

The second half of Daniel presents a different picture of Jewish resistance but one that was still contingent upon maintaining Jewish identity and protecting the sanctity of the Law. Breaking into a new genre of literature, chapters 7-12 created an apocalyptic worldview in which opposition to empire was no longer avoidable and active resistance was necessary. The authorship of the second half of Daniel was contemporary with Antiochus IV's rule of terror a fact reflected in its apocalyptic nature and the difference between the two halves of the book. As a whole, chapters 6-7 presented a sovereign God that was not the king. Portier-Young observed that the authors of Daniel were not escaping reality through literature but rather exposing it.<sup>199</sup>

She said,

Our authors are not interested in resistance action only. They are committed to the articulation and promulgation of resistance discourse that unthinks the logic of Empire and asserts in its place an alternative vision of reality...They understand that because hidden realities shape visible realities, they must be revealed. They counter imperial hegemony by exposing it, making visible the hidden logic and structures of domination in order to enable full-fledged resistance in mind, body, and spirit. They also reveal the hidden power and providence of God, relocation of ultimate power from earth to heaven and asserting the conditional, finite, and partial nature of temporal rule. This revealed knowledge provides the necessary basis for the resistant action they advocate.<sup>200</sup>

These apocalyptic themes that Portier-Young pointed out should sound quite familiar.

They are the same themes presented in the Maccabees. The production of a work such as Daniel accomplished a similar goal to the speeches of the seven brothers. They

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<sup>199</sup> This could be viewed as a counterpart to the prophecies of restoration discussed in chapter one of this project. The texts discussed there were aimed at creating a usable past to make sense of the future. Essentially they were ignoring the present and the texts produced allowed them to do so. Daniel is the opposite. While it takes the form of prophecy its intended purpose has very little to do with the future and everything to do with the present.

<sup>200</sup> Portier Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 44.

sought to reveal the reality of the imperial power as it related to them, and replace it with a narrative in which YHWH reigns supreme.

Rather than court tales, the second half of Daniel is characterized by apocalyptic dreams, visions, and their interpretations, many of which referred somewhat directly to Antiochus' reign of terror. Turning again to the prophecy regarding Alexander as a goat, following the split of the Alexander's kingdom into four, there was one final piece to the prophecy:

Out of one of them came another horn, a little one, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the beautiful land. It grew as high as the host of heaven. It threw down to the earth some of the host and some of the stars, and trampled on them. Even against the prince of the host it acted arrogantly; it took the regular burnt offering away from him and overthrew the place of his sanctuary. Because of wickedness, the host was given over to it together with the regular burnt offering; it cast truth to the ground, and kept prospering in what it did.<sup>201</sup>

This depiction of Antiochus is highly metaphorical and yet unmistakably about him.

This description made specific mention of Antiochus actions against the Jews and considered them to be actions against "the prince of the host" YHWH himself. The "casting of the truth to the ground" likely is a reference to the Torah and the attempts of Antiochus to suppress it among the Jews. Over all, this depiction of Antiochus acknowledged his power but alongside that of YHWH. The end of chapter provided a more nuanced description of Antiochus' rule saying:

At the end of their (the successors) rule,  
when the transgressions have reached their full measure,  
a king of bold countenance shall arise,  
skilled in intrigue.  
He shall grow strong in power,  
shall cause fearful destruction,

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<sup>201</sup> Daniel 8: 9-12.



and shall succeed in what he does.  
He shall destroy the powerful  
and the people of the holy ones.  
By his cunning  
he shall make deceit prosper under his hand,  
and in his own mind he shall be great.  
Without warning he shall destroy many  
and shall even rise up against the Prince of princes.  
But he shall be broken, and not by human hands.<sup>202</sup>

In this interpretation of the vision, Antiochus' power was once again acknowledged but it concluded with a significant statement of YHWH's power. Despite his reign of terror, Antiochus will be broken by divine will. Once again, this portrayal of his reign elevated YHWH as a global God whom even non-Jewish people serve. This removed power from Antiochus in a way that resembled the speeches found in the Maccabees.

Apocalyptic works such as this one recognized reality but also provided a base of resistance. Antiochus' brutality was readily acknowledged but it was put in contrast to God's power and plan for the Jews. Books such as the Maccabees and Daniel did not simply recount stories of resistance but were works of resistance themselves. They emphasized the sovereignty of YHWH and the significance of the Law above the imperial power. Eleazar and seven brothers stood face to face with Antiochus, the epitome of brutality and the hands of empire. Similarly, Daniel and his companions faced death for being Jews and adhering to their traditions. In both cases, following the Law was both the reason and they face death and the source of strength in the moment. The preservation of these stories in their context was an active effort to encourage Jews under Antiochus' reign to emulate these stories and remain true to their faith and who they were as Jews; an identity that had been centuries in the making.

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<sup>202</sup> Daniel 8:23-25

## Chapter 5: A Malleable Strength

The subject of this work has been the formation of Jewish identity in response to imperialism. In the face of different imperial powers Jewish communities had to adapt their identity to accommodate changing social and political contexts. Their identity was first and foremost grounded in the notion that their relationship with their God created an identity distinct from other communities. This separation was made manifest through a number of ideologically significant tenets of their religious beliefs that helped find expression in their identity. The five most prominent in their literature were the Covenant between YHWH and the ancestors, the Promised Land, the Law, the exclusive worship of YHWH, and the Temple. Each of these tenets was affected and redefined as the Jews interacted with different forms of imperialism.

In chapter two I discussed the Jewish response to Assyrian and Babylonian imperialism. During this period, the Jews experienced tremendous hardship and conflict with the imperial powers. In an attempt to make sense of these conflicts and the havoc wreaked upon their society, the Jews re-wrote their past to explain their present. Stories of king Josiah's restorative reforms helped to resituate Jewish identity on a more nuanced rendition of Law and an expanded God-idea. Simultaneously, the law was redacted to reflect an imperial context. This use of literature was an attempt at creating continuity between their past and their present circumstances. The characterization of kings based on their adherence to their laws provided an explanation for why the Jews experienced conflict. Kings who paid more attention to the Law were seen as beneficial to the community and those who did not were held responsible for the conflict.

The ultimate conflict was the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian Exile. The loss of land and Temple and the shock of displacement elicited a number of ideological responses. The Jews responded to the Assyrian and Babylonian powers by elevating YHWH above the gods of these imperial powers in more formal way. This marked a moment when they began to change how they understood their monotheism and lent legitimacy to their efforts at creating retroactive continuity and developing an identity that could accommodate diaspora. Jewish response during this period was characterized as restoration. Josiah's reforms were considered to be attempts at restoring the Jews to a previous state of positive relation with God through the Covenant. Following the Exile, the loss of the Temple, and the loss of a Jewish king, restoration prophecies became important. A future like that presented in Ezekiel promised a future in which the Jews would return to the Promised Land, the Temple would once again stand, and a Messiah from the line of David would reign. These promises of restoration aided in enabling the Jews to retain their identity even in diaspora and became especially useful in response to Persian imperialism.

Chapter three revealed the success of the developments addressed in chapter two as the Jews faced Persian imperialism. Following the exile, the Jews were successful in developing an identity that had a malleable strength that could adapt to different circumstances. Their success in diaspora was due to having crafted a narrative of restoration that gave order to a chaotic presence under a global God. During the Persian period these ideas underwent another stage of development as Persian imperialism, particularly under Cyrus, was far more favorable to Jewish customs than that of the Assyrians of the Babylonians. Cyrus accommodated the expectations of his

subjects by honoring their local customs and even co-opting their local gods as a source of his power rather than asserting his own. For the Jews, this meant the opportunity to return to Jerusalem and begin reconstruction on the Temple. Some Jews chose to return, but others chose to stay in diaspora. This choice to stay out of Jerusalem is indicative of an identity that was already well adapted to a diasporic reality. Yet, the division of Jewish society between diasporic Jews and non-diasporic Jews and the need to re-negotiate their identity in response to a favorable foreign imperial power which again required the reconstruction of their identity through literary means.

The Jews accepted Cyrus' reign as legitimate by considering him chosen and anointed by God: a king that resembled the Davidic Messiah in the restoration prophecies. The expansion of their idea of God made this possible by considering YHWH a truly global God over all peoples. This differently monotheistic God-idea allowed the Jews to accept a foreign king and reasserted an identity that could accommodate a foreign context and still retain an identity that emphasized separateness. The Jews did not need to respond to Cyrus' imperialism the way they did with the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Rather, they needed to construct a means of accepting him.

The acceptance of a foreign king was justified by a global, monotheistic God, a process that also allowed for the Jewish communities to better absorb non Jews who married into the tradition and other non-Jews who lived among them. In Jerusalem Ezra dealt with the issue by reframing the Law. Rather than command complete absolution of these marriages, however, the marriages were acceptable provided the non-Jewish wife accepted Jewish customs and religion. Stories such as Ruth justified intermarriage so long as the non-Jew was devoted to YHWH, a criteria based in the global nature of

YHWH used to justify the acceptance of Cyrus. Persian imperialism allowed them to change in positive ways, and allowed the reconstruction of an identity that was heavily reliant on the strength of abstract concepts like monotheism and the Law.

Following the Persian period Jewish identity was more explicit than it had ever been. It was fully grounded in the importance of the Law and the authority of global monotheistic deity in a way that caused contention with the imperial power. As discussed in chapter four, under Seleucid rule this newly reframed identity was faced with unprecedented opposition. What began as an internal conflict between two Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem soon became a full-scale revolt against Antiochus IV and his reign of terror. This conflict was not an issue of Hellenism versus Judaism, though the texts often focus on this aspect of the revolt.

In contrast to earlier periods the Jews did not adapt their identity to accommodate imperial authority. Instead their identity made active resistance both possible and necessary. As aspects of their identity such as the temple and their monotheistic beliefs were directly challenged, the strength of their identity made it necessary for them to rebel. The very elements that Antiochus threatened then served as the foundation for their resistance. Aside from the actual battles of the revolt, this resistance was significantly ideological in nature with their reframed identity serving as the foundation. Stories of martyrs found in the Maccabees are accompanied by grand speeches that use the Law and the sovereignty of YHWH to dethrone Antiochus and replace him with YHWH. The act of dying for your faith was also perceived of as a statement of resistance and an assertion of identity. These assertions of identity also permeated literary resistance to imperial authority. Post Maccabean images of

Alexander the Great and the first half of the book of Daniel utilized sentiments found in the martyrs' speeches placing YHWH's power over the empire's.

This approach to the formation of Jewish identity is significant because it restored Jewish agency in the face of imperialism and granted them agency. The image of the Jews we have in the Hebrew bible is the end product of a long process of change. The Law abiding, monotheistic martyrs who resisted Antiochus existed because of the presence of a strong identity, forged over centuries in their experiences as imperial subjects. A strong sense of identity was key to the Jewish experience under shifting imperial powers. The key to its strength was malleability and the willingness of the Jews to adapt. In the face of imperialism, the Jews did not perceive of themselves as subjects or a people that had to bend to the will of the empire. Jewish identity hinged on one broad concept that defined their interaction with imperialism in the ancient world: separateness. The belief that they were called out to remain distinct from the rest of the world by YHWH was the point for their identity that all other tenets reinforced. The Temple and the Promised Land were a means of having physical and special separateness. Their Law dictated social and religious practices that were also meant to be markers of separation. Being imperial subjects posed a challenge to Jewish identity as it threatened their perceptions of separation. In the face of imperial authority, the Jews did not perceive of themselves as subjects or a people that had to bend to the will of the empire. Rather, they fought to preserve their autonomy in ways that superseded political identity.

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