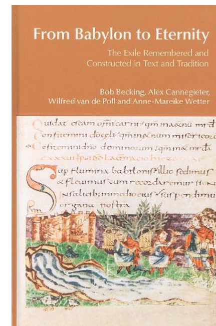
From Babylon to Eternity: The Exile Remembered and Constructed in Text and Tradition, by Bob Becking, Alex Cannegieter, Wilfred van de Poll, and Anne-Mareike Wetter



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The concise *From Babylon to Eternity: The Exile Remembered and Constructed in Text and Tradition* consists of a series of four essays, one each by the four authors mentioned in the title, with a brief introduction to set out the book's

program. The essays are of typical journal article length and corresponding scope, and exhibit the kind of consistency of method and direction that allows the work to read well as a unit. The volume offers a reception history of the Exile which punctuates the reported history of Judah, either implicitly or explicitly, so frequently and profoundly in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (HB/OT). The book begins with Becking's essay summarizing the current picture of Judah's Exile provided by archaeology, and moves through inner-biblical reception of the Exile in Wetter's essay to the evolving reception of the Exile in post-biblical Jewish tradition in van de Poll's, before finishing with Cannegieter's sampling of Christian reception both ancient and modern.

The authors manifest the expected sensitivity to the role of the reader and reading community in the interpretation of this biblical event and seek to explore the way the Exile resonated through certain of its subsequent reading communities. As the subtitle declares, reception is a process of remembering mingled with (re)construction: "There is a constant dialogue between reality, texts interpreting and appropriating that reality, and new readers of these texts, living in a[n often very different] reality" (1). Nevertheless, this is not a theory-laden work, and the brief introduction quickly gives way to the main text, which at 103 pages is suggestive rather than comprehensive. Clear and approachable, it provides a pleasant relief for the reader who has waded painfully through weighty, obtuse theological tomes.

"In Babylon: The Exile as Historical (Re)Construction," Bob Becking critiques the traditional idea of a total Exile to Babylon that left an empty land. Taking his methodological lead from historian R. G. Collingwood, Becking asks what we know about the Exile and its historical context from historical and archaeological data.

Turning to specific forms of evidence, Becking first compares the Babylonian Chronicle's record of Nebuchadnezzar's military campaigns with the evidence of 2 Kings 24–5. Next, the Gedaliah incident (Jer 40:7–41:15) raises the question of the limited usefulness of clay seals or bullae to confirm the reality of characters appearing in HB/OT narratives of late pre-exilic Judah. Other archaeological and epigraphic evidence treated by Becking includes occupational evidence in exilic Mizpah, evidence of the early Egyptian Jewish diaspora, apparent mention of the exiled King Jehoiachin in Babylonian provision lists, and evidence found in the Murashu-archives of flourishing diaspora Jewish communities in the Persian period. Inevitably, he also treats the famous Cyrus Cylinder at some length, helpfully offering a full translation.

Becking's thrust is to "demythologize" the traditional understanding of the Exile. He seeks first of all, in Hans Barstad's train, to refute the "myth of the empty land," the idea that Judah was left vacant during the Exile, observing that the populations of Bethel and Mizpah (unlike Jerusalem) appear stable throughout this period. He secondly refutes the "myth of the mass return" of exiled Jews to Yehud at the close of the exilic period, using the evidence of substantial Persian-era diaspora Jewish populations: "The Exile should not be construed as a massive event; the descendants of the Exiled Judaeans returned in waves and many remained in Babylonia" (31). Third, he holds that the Temple was only rebuilt in the mid-fifth century BCE. Despite a definite air of historical scepticism, though, Becking is not a minimalist; he wishes to free from distortion, rather than entirely negate, the historical reality of the Exile.

Becking's article, then, functions as historiographic background for the reception-historical essays to follow. Clear and thorough, it constitutes an effective overview of the current state of play in archaeological and epigraphic evidence relating to Judah/Yehud in this period. Now, Becking's conclusions may sound familiar to anyone who has kept up with these topics, and I at times felt as if the total Exile, empty land, and *en masse* return myths functioned as a kind of straw man; does anyone beyond first-year Bible classes still think this way about the Exile? Nevertheless, for sheer clarity and completeness, this rates as a very worthy article.

Anne-Mareike Wetter's essay, "Balancing the Scales: The Construction of the Exile as Countertradition in the Bible" begins from the premise that the Exile constituted an identity crisis for Judah that "spurred the formation of a specifically Israelite tradition more than any other" and survives as "an underlying strand of consciousness that pervades all utterances about YHWH and his people" (35). After surveying the Hebrew words used in relation to the Exile in the HB/OT, Wetter proposes that stages in a national grief process manifest themselves in a certain succession of HB/OT texts, from Lamentations to relevant portions of Jeremiah and then Deuteronomy. In texts such as these, the Exile is comprehended with reference to clearly pre-existing traditions surrounding Exodus, Covenant and Promised Land.

Wetter first looks at Lamentations 2, siding with Westermann against those who would understand the bleakness of Lam 1–2, 4–5 as subservient to the relative hopefulness found in Lam 3. In Jeremiah, Wetter selects Jer 4:5–6:30, interpreting it as *ex eventu* prophecy, and finding that in contrast to Lam 2, Jeremiah emphasizes that the judgment of Exile is not total.

Wetter finally treats Deut 4:25–31 and 28:15–30:20 as further retrospective "anticipations" of Exile that reveal a further development of hopeful themes: "The Moses of Deuteronomy is positive that Israel will eventually abandon the Covenant and consequently be banished from the Promised land, but he is equally certain that this is not the last word … there is the promise of return from the Exile [which] will lead Israel to a less presumptuous, but all the more genuine faith in YHWH" (54).

The value of Wetter's essay resides in her demonstration of the principle she borrows from Brueggemann: "Israel's counter-testimony has its natural habitat in Exile" (55). The crisis of the Exile necessitated a new understanding of Israel's entire spiritual tradition, and the realization that the promises of YHWH had been conditional. Her approach to the three or four chosen texts would help the Bible student turn to other HB/OT texts indebted to Judah's exilic spiritual identity crisis, such as the exilic psalms or reflections on Israel's past such as Nehemiah 9, and fruitfully explore the reappropriation of Israel's spiritual heritage in the context of that gritty present reality.

Wilfred van de Poll's chapter, "The Exile of God: The Galut in Jewish Construction," also proposes a general movement from negative to positive perceptions. Assuming the stance that the collective memory of social groups is both selective and creative, he explains the customary distinction in Jewish thought between the historical fact of Diaspora and the corresponding shared cognition of Exile in its "paradigmatic and identity-shaping function," Galut. "In this [latter] sense, the Exile has never really ended. It has become a permanent reality for every Jew. The experience of Galut has shaped and continues to shape the self-image and identity of the Jewish community vis-à-vis the gentile world surrounding it" (58–9).

The trend towards a positive interpretation of Galut begins with the Babylonian Jewish leader Saadia Gaon's explanation of the continuation of Galut in terms of Israel's partial responsibility: for some within Israel, the exile constituted punishment, while her righteous experienced Galut instead as a test of character. The twelfth-century Judah Halevi of Spain in his work *The Kuzari* interpreted the Galut more positively as Israel's vicarious trial by God on account of the sins and sorrows of the wider world. The late-medieval kabbalistic work, the *Zohar*, understands the Galut metaphysically as an alienation of God's earthly Shekhinah, or a kind of schism within the being of God. And Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–72) viewed the Shekhinah as fragmented and dispersed through all created entities, such that, in the words of a modern scholar, "all being is in Galut" (68).

Thus van de Poll's essay offers revealing insights into specifically Jewish traditions of the medieval and Renaissance eras: clearly a period of significant development in Jewish religious philosophy. The final example, Luria's view of physical creation as inherently alienated from true existence, reveals convergence with the revived gnosticism of a figure like Jakob Böhme (c. 1575–1624), almost a contemporary of Luria, and reminds us of the potent gnosticism of the early centuries of the Christian era.

The final essay by Alex Cannegieter, "From Babylon to Eternity: Appropriation of the Babylon-Motif in Christian Homiletical Constructions," reflects more directly upon intertextual theory than the preceding essays. The outcome of thinking by scholars she cites such as Michael Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva was the realization that every text possesses "intertextuality" by virtue of intended or unintended connections with other texts, and that the definition of "text" may include cultural artifacts other than written documents. Drawing on Ellen van Wolde, Cannegieter promotes a balance between diachronic and synchronic approaches to intertextuality, retaining a place for an author's deliberate use of earlier texts.

Cannegieter then reads the Babylon motif in Revelation 17–18 as a description of contemporary Rome according to the symbolism of Judah's great exilic enemy, where Babylon the whore constitutes the polar opposite of Jerusalem the bride. This dual image was re-appropriated by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* and *Enarratio in Psalmum CXXXVI*, for whom Jerusalem stood for the Kingdom or "City of God," and Babylon for the collected and organized sum of autonomous human endeavour. The Renaissance figure Petrarch/Petrarca (1304–74) later described the famous "Babylonian captivity of the papacy" in Avignon (1309–78) using the same symbolism. Luther's reuse of this symbolism in *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* (1520) instead made Rome itself the Babylon that held true believers in bondage!

Cannegieter's final example consists of a sermon delivered by one Jan Egens Cannegieter on 9 May 1945, to a congregation in newly liberated Amsterdam. The mixed and turbulent feelings of a newly liberated people preparing to rebuild a devastated land are captured in his sermon on Ezra 3:12–13, showing "how an exegetical sermon can be the utmost example of intertextuality" (97). But while the four examples taken from the book of Revelation and from the works of Augustine, Petrarch, and Luther constitute four very prominent (Christian) appropriations of Babylon/Exile symbolism, this fifth example presents us with an almost unknown figure. While Alex Cannegieter knows who this Dutch preacher was who shares her surname,

the reader does not and might have benefited from having the connection explained. Nevertheless, this lining up of five successive reincarnations of Babylon and its captives gives us much to ponder concerning the power of readers over a biblical text, and also the spell of a poignant biblical text over its readers.

The implicit goal of this book is uncomplicated. It is simply to apply reception-historical textual sensitivities to reuse of the biblical Exile traditions. The absence of a general agenda is reflected in the absence of a conclusion to the whole, and in the weak concluding sentence to the introduction: "We hope to have designed a fine example of the ways in which traditions go" (3). Yet I personally am attracted to this light methodological touch, which leaves the whole work balanced and approachable, and not too technical. It is not a profound addition to reception-historical theory. It is a contribution to the stock of reception-historical studies of seminal biblical texts, and an example of ways in which accounting for the reception of such key texts can be done.

Perhaps I can capture the impact of the whole work using a sentence from the first page. The very first paragraph attacks the traditional concept of a total exile of Judah following Babylonian conquest in 587/6 BCE: "Modern archaeology has revealed this version of history to be a myth" (1). The authors here appear to use "myth" in the more sweeping, popular sense, for a persuasive idea that is not true. Seeing the way the remaining essays play off Becking's, I think that in fact the statement works better if "myth" is understood in the more technical sense familiar to scholars. The point made so well by the book as a whole is not that the event of the Exile is fictional, but that it lives on beyond its historical occurrence as a potent symbol and explanatory structure that has the power to narrate experience and frame identity for subsequent reading communities. The Exile, the Babylonian captivity, and the return to Judah have proven their worth as a narratorial triptych, able to make sense of the spiritual experiences of alienation and restoration of readers from the suffering Christians of Revelation to a Dutch congregation in post-WWII Holland. It is in this special sense that the authors have indeed shown the Exile to be "myth."

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