CHAPTER TWO

LIFE IN JUDAH AND BABYLON
IN THE SIXTH CENTURY BC

INTRODUCTION

One key reason why many scholars maintain that Isa 40–55 is a product of the exilic community in Babylon is historical rather than exegetical. It is commonly held that Judah was left more or less empty after the destruction by the Neo-Babylonians in 586 BC. Judah would thus have lacked authors of the kind of calibre necessary for penning the poetry of Isa 40–55. Yet a small number of scholars, ranging all the way back to Buttenwieser, have sporadically challenged the picture of Judah as being only sparsely populated by illiterates.1 This debate is important and has significant ramifications for the present study. Therefore, I shall briefly assess the historical situation in Judah during the sixth century BC in order to assess to what extent the people in templeless Judah, given their social situation, would have been capable of composing Isa 40–55. Whether they were likely to have done so will be discussed throughout the rest of this book.

I shall first look at the biblical appraisals of the Judahite community found in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and elsewhere, and discuss what they tell us about the situation in Judah during the templeless period. We shall discover that the biblical evidence does not paint a unified picture of the situation in Judah; rather, it reflects a number of conflicting views. While some texts are biased towards the golah community in Babylon (2 Chron 36:14–23; 2 Kgs 17:20, 23; 24:13–14 and 25:11–12 // Jer 52:15–16; Jer 24:1–10; 39:10; Ezek 11:15; 33:24–29), other texts reflect a Judahite point of view (2 Kgs 25:22–26; Jer 40–42*; Lamentations). I shall then turn to the archaeological evidence and compare it with the two aforementioned biblical portraits of Judah. I shall argue that while the destruction of Jerusalem led to immense suffering and wide-ranging destruction both

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in the city and the surrounding areas of Judah, there is also evidence of continuous habitation in parts of Judah throughout this time period. I shall also reflect upon the literary quality of the book of Lamentations, a text that in all likelihood was composed by the community in Judah, and what light it can shed upon the question of the geographical setting of Isa 40–55. Finally, I shall look very briefly at the textual and archaeological data pertaining to the situation in the Babylonian golah, and explore to what extent this data provide a suitable background for Isa 40–55.

1. Life in Judah during the Exile: The Biblical Accounts

The impression of an “empty Judah” is based first and foremost on the biblical evidence, in particular on those texts that betray a golah perspective. As more than one scholar has noted and discussed this issue, a brief summary will suffice at this point.

To begin with 2 Chron 36:14–23 (cf. Jer 36:29), this passage describes the land of Judah as desolate, keeping the Sabbath rest during the 70 years while the exiles were in Babylon. Because the people of pre-exilic Judah had polluted the temple in Jerusalem, they were either killed or exiled. After the allotted time, the purged descendents of those who had been exiled at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC returned to the empty and purified land.

The passages in 2 Kgs 24:13–14 and 25:11–12 (// Jer 52:15–16) presents a similar picture. In these passages, the land is not totally empty but contains the poor of the land (קדואים הירדן) who were left in Judah to be vine-dressers and farmers. In the words of Lipschits, the goal of the account in 2 Kgs 25:12 “was to minimize the significance of those who remained in Judah and to amplify the importance of those who returned”. Jer 39:10 gives the same impression as it depicts how Nebuzaradan, the captain of

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3 Lipschits, Fall and Rise, p. 359.