Research Article

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Ezekiel and the Construction of Cultural Trauma

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Abstract: The book of Ezekiel may be effectively understood in terms of Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, in which catastrophic events take on a wider cultural significance because they are perceived as having consequences for group identity. The book of Ezekiel develops a new master narrative of Israelite history and identity, in which the catastrophes of 597 and 586 BCE are the culmination of generations of moral and religious offences against Yhwh, the God of Israel. Ezekiel's narrative constructs these events as having profound consequences for Israel's identity. Those taken to Babylonia are identified as victims of divine violence; as victims, they are the ones whom Yhwh has chosen as true Israelites. The book distinguishes this new Israel from the remnants of the old one still in Jerusalem, rejecting the claim that the latter are still members of the house of Israel. According to Ezekiel, to be an Israelite means to be a deportee. Although few texts outside Ezekiel are quite so overtly negative regarding Israel's history, its reckoning of the significance of Jerusalem's fall for Israelite identity resonates throughout the canon. With rare exceptions, the experience of deportation and life in Babylonia became the *sine qua non* of Israelite identity: only those who had it could count themselves true members of post-597 Israel. As a construction of the cultural significance of trauma, therefore, Ezekiel was remarkably successful. Thereafter, the events of 597 were construed not simply as practically and politically catastrophic, but as *traumatic*: the new master narrative placed them front and centre, with indelible and profound consequences for Israel's self-understanding.

Keywords: Ezekiel, trauma, sign acts, Israelite identity, history of Israel

In his seminal contribution to trauma studies, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Jeffrey Alexander draws attention to the symbolic significance of trauma in the cultural construction of collective identity. Alexander acknowledges the physical and material effects of catastrophic events, but argues that the most lasting consequences of catastrophe occur when such events are construed by a group as endangering its collective identity, and thus as requiring a systematic response that takes account of the traumatic event within the group's narrative of itself. Such responses adjust the stories told by a group about its origins, and the way that the group constructs its shared identity, in a way that incorporates the traumatic event into the group's collective narrative of its past, thereby enabling the group to conceive of its current self as essentially continuous with its past self, despite the traumatic rupture it has experienced. Alexander differentiates this process, which he terms "cultural trauma" – more precisely, the cultural construction of trauma – from "collective trauma." The latter refers to the actual events experienced by the group, whereas cultural trauma foregrounds the way that the group narrates and constructs its recollection of those events, integrating them into its wider cultural repertoire. Trauma, from this perspective, is not simply when a group

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undergoes a painful experience. Rather, it is when that painful experience is interpreted as affecting the group's identity: when it "enter[s] into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity…[and is represented] as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go."[1] "Cultural trauma" designates trauma that in this way has become part of a group's collective narrative, through a process of "symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters" that make sense of the traumatic event within the overarching structures of the group's collective identity.[2]

This article contends that the book of Ezekiel may be more richly understood when read with reference to cultural trauma. The book depicts Ezekiel, and then his community at Chebar, as comprising a carrier group for a new master narrative of Israelite history; this new master narrative is contained within and communicated by the book. The book constructs this new narrative as a story in which the catastrophes of 597 and 586 BCE are the culmination of generations of moral and religious offences against Yhwh, the God of Israel. These events are seen as reflecting a reality in which the deity has finally inflicted a severe punishment upon Israel for its offences, with the effects of this judgement being felt at the very core of Israel's being. Those taken to Babylonia are identified by Ezekiel as the victims of the divine violence and, as the victims, the ones whom Yhwh has chosen to undergo the purification process that renders them the true heirs of Israel. According to the book of Ezekiel, to be an Israelite means to be a deportee: no one who has not undergone this experience may be part of Israel. The book starkly distinguishes this more limited Israel from the remnants of the old one, vociferously rejecting the claim of those left in the homeland to still be members of the house of Israel. Indeed, Ezekiel contends that those (now-former) Israelites have been purposefully left behind in Jerusalem in order to die: by dying, they will vacate the city and its surrounding countryside and make way for the true (deported) Israelites' eventual return. Reading these diatribes with an awareness of the demands of cultural trauma clarifies Ezekiel's propensity to employ such vitriolic expressions in its preference for the 597 deportee community.

1 The background of the book of Ezekiel

Although the book of Ezekiel is ultimately the product of a lengthy process of revision and supplementation, its origins lie firmly in the sixth-century destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the deportation of many of its inhabitants to Babylonia. In the following pages, our primary interest will be in the book of Ezekiel's construction of these events as significant for Israelite identity: the way that the book speaks of these events as traumatic. Recognising the book's function in this regard underscores that it should by no means be considered an objective eyewitness: its depictions serve purposes other than those of the historian. At the same time, the extent to which the book may be compellingly interpreted as a response to trauma underlines the fundamental connection between the book and the events it describes.[3] It is accordingly useful to begin with a brief review.

The kingdom's defeat occurred in two parts. The first stage took place just after the turn of the century, when the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem in response to an attempted rebellion by King Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim's death, apparently in the middle of the siege, put his son Jehoiachin on the throne; after just a few months, in 597, Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar. This was quickly followed by the deporta-

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1 Alexander, *Trauma*, 15. "For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing; representations of these events are quite another."

2 Alexander, *Trauma*, 3.

3 Trauma-informed interpretations of Ezekiel are becoming more widespread; major works include Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined*, Poser; *Das Ezechielbuch Als Trauma-Literatur*; Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*; Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature*. For a bibliography of work up to the mid-2010s, see David G. Garber, Jr., 'Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies', *CBR* 14, no. 1 (2015): 24–44.

tion of the kingdom's elites to Babylonia: Jehoiachin, members of the royal family and administration, military and priestly personnel, and a number of industrial specialists (2 Kgs 24:10–16). Cuneiform ration tablets confirm that the king and his sons were taken to the capital city, Babylon.[4] The remaining deportees were resettled in the countryside, in a land-for-service scheme typical of Babylonia's deportation programme.[5] The book of Ezekiel identifies the titular prophet as among these 597 deportees, and the prophet's audience as a group resettled at a site along the Chebar canal. Extra-biblical materials from a settlement called Al-Yahudu ("the City of Judah") indicate that at least some of the deportees from Judah (as part of the 597 deportation, or later ones) were resettled in the environs of Nippur, but the site named in Ezekiel (Tel Abib) is not otherwise known.[6]

A second and final surrender of the city occurred in 586, after a prolonged siege provoked by renewed rebellion under Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, whom the Babylonians had installed in 597. In the wake of this surrender, much of the city was destroyed, including the temple, and further deportations removed more of its population to Babylonia. Where these later deportees were taken is not reported by any biblical text.[7] Many of the oracles contained in the book of Ezekiel identify themselves as having been delivered between these two events, and one of the book's central concerns is to establish that the events of 597 did not constitute the final judgement of Jerusalem but only a first stage: those left in the city after the first deportations had not evaded punishment but been left behind for this later and more complete phase of destructive judgement.

That these events were politically, socially, and economically catastrophic for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah is incontrovertible. Those deported in 597 lost their homes, their livelihoods, their land, and sometimes their lives.[8] After 586, the kingdom ceased to exist as even the quasi-independent vassal state it had been under the Assyrians and Babylonians for the previous century and a half. The population experienced mass displacements of varied types; in addition to the forced deportations to Babylonia, there were internal migrations provoked by efforts to seek sanctuary in the fortified cities, external migrations seeking refuge in the Transjordanian states and in Egypt, and displacements as a result of Babylonian agricultural resettlement projects in the new province, among other movements.[9] Archaeological evidence indicates substantial if not universal destruction of Judah's towns and cities, with limited signs of redevelopment until the fifth century.[10]

These practical catastrophes need not, however, have triggered a shared construction of these events as culturally traumatic. Many other kingdoms were defeated and their peoples deported by the Babylonian Empire; no other populations (of which we are aware) reckoned with these experiences in a way that

4 These are the so-called Weidner tablets, which may be found as Mélanges Dussaud A and B within the ORACC project 'Cuneiform Texts Mentioning Israelites, Judeans, and Other Related Groups' (http://oracc.iaas.upenn.edu/ctij/corpus); cf. 2 Kgs 25:27–30.

5 See Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia* for a description of this system.

6 The Al Yahudu texts published thus far appear in Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia*; Wunsch, with Pearce, *Judeans by the Waters of Babylon*, is eagerly awaited. Although these texts are not direct evidence concerning the circumstances of the community depicted within the book of Ezekiel, they give a useful sense of the conditions of life in Babylonia; see also Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*.

7 It is possible that some were resettled with or near the deportee community that produced the book of Ezekiel – there are some signs that the book's exclusive preference for the 597 deportees is ameliorated in its final chapters, which might plausibly be construed as an attempt to incorporate later groups of deportees – but there is no explicit indication of this within the book.

8 Although the death rate associated with ancient deportation protocols is unknown, estimates of death rates during Middle Eastern involuntary migrations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE range from 20 to 50% (Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession*, 94, 96, 102).

9 On the range of involuntary migrations provoked by the Babylonian attacks on Judah in the early sixth century, see Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined*.

10 See among others Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land*; Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period*; Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*. The extent and duration of the devastation wrought by the Babylonians has been much disputed, but for present purposes the details are largely irrelevant: only the most extreme deny that Judah surrendered to and was provincia-lised by the Babylonian Empire, that its king(s) were deported along with at least some other important members of Jerusalemite society, or that the city including its temple to Yhwh suffered damage as a result.

enabled their ongoing existence as distinctive cultural entities. That Israel[11] survived the destruction of Jerusalem and its deportation to Babylonia is due largely to the cultural work of the book of Ezekiel, and other biblical texts, whose authors and editors, together with the community ultimately responsible for preserving this literature, were the "collective agents of the trauma process."[12]

2 The collective agents of trauma

By "collective agents of the trauma process," Alexander means those who are responsible for constructing the traumatic experience as cultural trauma; elsewhere he uses the terminology of "carrier groups," emphasising these agents' communicative function in the construction of traumatic experience.[13] Alexander also notes that these agents tend to be those in a community who have "particular discursive talents" for meaning-making, noting, in particular, that this "talent" may be a result of personal or cultural prestige, or of institutional status. Although stripped of his formal social standing the moment of his departure from Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel is presented by the book as a hereditary member of the Jerusalem priesthood (Ezek 1:3). Such a figure would probably have held at least a lingering degree of natural authority, even in a displaced community of deportees.[14] Although the prophet – a role that may or may not have lent additional social weight to the proclamations associated with him – is depicted within the book as sometimes at odds with the community, this appears to be ultimately outweighed by this lingering sacred status, even at such a distance from the temple. Although the details of the book's author(s) are blurred by time and distance, the book's survival also suggests a powerful capacity for communication on the part of those behind it.

3 Embodied communication

As the persuasive demands placed on collective agents of trauma suggest, socially embodied forms of communication are particularly significant in cultural constructions of trauma. Likening the trauma process to performative speech acts, Alexander argues that the construction of catastrophic events as traumatic necessarily takes place before and in conversation with an audience. With regard to Ezekiel, we may think of both the audience depicted within the book and the external audience the book implicitly presupposes. Neither the prophet within the book nor the book itself can create cultural trauma without an audience.

In the first instance, the audience for Ezekiel's construction of cultural trauma is the collectivity that will become this trauma's carrier group: those who will play the role in communicating to wider publics the conviction that the catastrophe was, in fact, culturally traumatic. Within the book, the deportee community at Chebar – those whom Ezekiel's account of the trauma favours (or some portion of it) – is presented as this audience-cum-carrier group.[15] The prophet's words and actions are designed to achieve the book's communicative intentions *vis-à-vis* this audience: to persuade them that what they have experienced is a culturally traumatic event – that is, an event with consequences for their collective identity.[16] Only then

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11 Ezekiel unambiguously and consistently refers to the deportees at Chebar as Israelites, despite the fact that they were deported from the kingdom of Judah. For discussion and analysis of this identification, see Crouch, *Israel and Judah*, 49–90.

12 Alexander, *Trauma*, 16.

13 Ibid.

14 Whether the Ezekiel of the book correlates directly to a historical Ezekiel is only of partial concern here; insofar as the book constructs its trauma narrative, it does so using a figure whose social standing is significant, and cultural trauma is useful for understanding why this is.

15 Although the link between the Chebar community within the book and a corresponding group beyond or behind it is difficult to pin down, the book's survival suggests that something like the Chebar community is ultimately responsible for preserving and disseminating this interpretation of Jerusalem's fall and its inhabitants' deportation. That is, an interpretation of 597 and thereafter as not merely catastrophic but as traumatic has survived only because some real audience has been persuaded by it.

16 Alexander, *Trauma*, 16–7, quote on 17.

can the reality of that trauma be communicated to a wider public. Thus, the book depicts the prophet as frequently frustrated by his fellow Israelites in Babylonia, but also ultimately in solidarity with them, over and against anyone outside this community.

With the importance of a public audience for the trauma process in mind, the prophet's predilection for sign-acts is striking. More than any book other than Jeremiah – itself widely interpreted as a response (or collection of responses) to trauma – the book of Ezekiel foregrounds the bodily performance of the prophetic message. Deploying a series of performative sign-acts that (re)enact the trauma of Jerusalem's defeat(s), the prophet is shown as engaged in all manner of outlandish behaviour. He lays on his side to symbolise the judgement laid upon the city (4:4–8); he builds a model depicting the city's siege (4:1–3); and he bakes bread on excrement (4:9–15), cuts off his hair (5:1–4), crawls through a hole in the wall dragging baggage behind him (12:1–7), and fails to mourn his own wife (24:15–27) – all in order to act out the traumatic consequences of this siege.[17] These sign-acts signal that Jerusalem's defeat is not merely a geo-political event but an experience with profound consequences for the way in which the prophet's audience conceives of their community. Indeed, that the people's collective identity *as Israel*, and what it means to *be Israel*, is at stake as a result of these events is made repeatedly clear: it is Israel's sin that Ezekiel bears (4:4–5); the baking of bread on excrement symbolises the dire straits awaiting the people of Israel (5:13); and the division and reunification of the two sticks also concern the house of Israel (37:12–23). In the sign-acts of the baggage and of his wife's death, Ezekiel himself is called "a sign for the house of Israel" (12:6; 24:24).[18]

4 A new master narrative

At the forefront of Alexander's theory of cultural trauma is his contention that collective trauma becomes cultural trauma only when a catastrophic event is given cultural significance for a group's collective identity. This significance is conveyed through the construction of a new "master narrative," which re-imagines and re-narrates collective identity in a way that places the catastrophic event at its heart.[19] The book of Ezekiel creates such a master narrative by depicting the fall of Jerusalem, and thus Israel's present circumstances, as the disastrous culmination of a re-imagined, highly negative account of Israel's past relationship with its deity.

Master narratives, as this suggests, are fundamentally historical (or rather, fundamentally historicising; their significance lies less in a fully factual relationship to historical reality than in the fact that they are a version of history held in common by group members). As Alexander observes, construction of cultural trauma almost inherently requires the "searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but also deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life."[20] Indeed, while all communities are "in an important sense…constituted by their past," the past acquires an especially important role during times of significant social, cultural, and physical upheaval, when the coherence and continuity of the community are under threat.[21] Involuntary displacement, such as that suffered by the 597 deportees, presents an especially radical threat to collective

17 The definition of a prophetic sign act is somewhat disputed, resulting in differing enumerations of the phenomenon in Ezekiel, but usually around a dozen. Whether these sign-acts were actually performed in public by a prophet bearing the name Ezekiel is not of primary interest; real or imagined, they play an outsized role in the book. For an interpretation of these sign acts in Ezekiel and Jeremiah as somatic symptoms of trauma see Crouch, "Jeremiah and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts").

18 Ezek 4 and 37 also explore the relationship between Israel and Judah; on this issue see Crouch, "Ezekiel's Immobility;" Crouch, "Duelling Dynasties."

19 Alexander, *Trauma*, 17.

20 Ibid., 26.

21 Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 153; cf., e.g., Swedenburg, "Popular Memory and the Palestinian National Past," 155.

identity, insofar as it severs the bond between people and place. This must be overcome in order for the community to survive, and telling stories about a shared collective past is one of "the means through which security, community, and the potency of place are produced even in displacement."[22] Narrative asserts an essential continuity between *that* past and *this* present, reconstructing the imagined community as one that bridges what was and what is.[23]

This is why the book of Ezekiel engages so intensely with Israel's past: it is seeking to re-imagine Israel's historical account of itself in terms that take the recent catastrophe fully into consideration. The paradigmatic example is Ezekiel 20, which narrates an extended and highly negative account of Israel's past sins. The chapter traces Israel's origins to the exodus from Egypt, in which Israel's unique relationship with Yhwh – and thus the defining characteristic of "Israeliteness" – was first established (20:5–6, 10). The chapter then proceeds with a litany of sin that presents Israelite history as a story of progressively greater impurity, stemming especially from Israel's predilection for other deities. Even in Egypt, Israel did not renounce other gods (20:7–8). In an attempt to help, Yhwh provided Israel in the wilderness with comprehensive instructions as to what it means to act as an Israelite (20:11–12) – yet the people failed to uphold these commandments (20:13, 21). Yhwh allows them to enter the land, but not even there are they capable of living according to Yhwh's expectations (20:28). In the end, Israel's failure brought about its eviction from the land: Israel has earned its fate by failing to uphold its heritage as Yhwh's special people. A similarly historical orientation undergirds Ezekiel 16 and 23, which provide grim narratives of Jerusalem's past misdeeds; the condemnations of the current Israelite leadership in Ezekiel 17 and 19 are also told from a historical perspective, and the argument in Ezekiel 18 over the justice of divine punishment is worked out in a thought experiment crossing multiple generations, rather than on an individual basis.

The construction of cultural trauma operates in relation to such narratives through a "sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences."[24] In the pursuit of a new "master narrative" concerning group history and identity, the architects of cultural trauma thus propose answers to several categories of questions.

First, they must establish "what actually happened – to the particular group and to the wider collectivity of which it is a part."[25] This is a question not merely of facts but of interpretation: in Ezekiel's case, "what actually happened" is not simply that there was a siege and a city that surrendered but a question of causes and consequences. It is inadequate simply to say that "the kings of Judah rebelled against Babylonia and Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonian army, ultimately surrendered, and had much of its population deported to Babylonia." The *reasons* for these events must be explained. The book of Ezekiel's interpretation of events is thus far more than a recitation of plain facts, and places the emphasis much less on the practical details of the siege and its aftermath than on their interpretation. Although this makes the book's use for historians more difficult, it is the fundamental work of cultural trauma construction: the identification of a catastrophic event as bearing meaning for the people who experienced it (and possibly also others), together with the placement of that event within a master narrative that takes it as the impetus to (re)define the essential elements of the community's shared identity.

The book of Ezekiel's efforts in this regard are quite sophisticated and are intertwined with its responses to other questions whose answers contribute to the cultural construction of trauma. Foremost, however, the book depicts the city's defeat and the deportation of Ezekiel's community as a case of divine judgement: Israel is in rural Babylonia, on the banks of the Chebar, because it has persistently sinned against Yhwh, imitating the religious and cultural practices of the nations and thereby endangering Israelite identity. The

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22 See, e.g., Feldman, "Home as a Refrain."

23 Originally, Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, and since adopted by a variety of disciplines, including migration studies, as a means of articulating the abstract and ideological aspects of social communities, over and above their practical expressions. The association between identity and the ability to narrate as key to the processing of traumatic experience has been variously discussed; see King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*; Caruth; *Unclaimed Experience*; Eyerman et al., *Narrating Trauma*.

24 Alexander, *Trauma*, 26.

25 Ibid., 17–8.

historical litany of Ezekiel 20 is again exemplary, presenting the Israelite past as a history of progressively greater sinfulness in which the Israelites turned away from Yhwh and pursued the gods of other nations since their origins in Egypt. The litany climaxes with Yhwh's judgement on Israel, which takes the form of its eviction from the land. The events of 597 were not simply geo-political but were rather – and much more fundamentally – religious and moral in nature: Jerusalem's surrender and Israel's deportation were not a result of Babylonian military supremacy but a consequence of Yhwh's decision to punish Israel for its sin.

As it constructs this new master narrative, the book of Ezekiel concomitantly identifies Israel as having been complicit in its own trauma: Israel sinned so egregiously that Yhwh was left with no choice but to act against it. This element of Ezekiel's master narrative is one of its less-appealing aspects for modern audiences, who are accustomed to overwhelmingly (or even exclusively) positive images of the deity and are aware of the psychological dangers of self- and victim-blaming. As a response to trauma, however, this negativity is convincingly understood as part of the book's efforts to provide its audience with "equipment for living": a way to survive in the wake of the disaster.[26] Ezekiel overcomes the trauma of defeat, deportation, and death by telling a story that reasserts the relationship of these traumatic events to the events that came before and after: it declares that the disaster happened *because of what the Israelites did*. By narrating the catastrophe as the culmination of Israelite sin, the book re-establishes an economy of cause and effect and affirms that the Israelites' actions have meaning: what Israel does, matters. Looking forward, this means that the Israelites are not helpless in the face of future disasters, but can choose to act in a way that prevents further trauma. Though highly negative, Ezekiel's account is thus constructive in the sense of providing survivors with a way forward: it "ironically empowers…by offering the hope of cultural recovery."[27]

The book of Ezekiel's account of "what actually happened" is also directly linked to its answer to Alexander's fourth question(s): "Who actually injured the victim? Who caused the trauma?"[28] Though the perpetrator of the trauma might appear to have been Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army, according to Ezekiel the true perpetrator of Israel's suffering was Yhwh. Israel's trauma was caused not by an earthly king and army, but by its own deity. Within the book this point is made ad nauseum: chapter after chapter describes the destruction wrought upon Israel and declares, "thus you/they will know that I am Yhwh."[29] Through these horrific events, Israel will know that the perpetrator of its suffering was Yhwh, and Yhwh alone.

Moreover, the announcements that Israel "will know that I am Yhwh" are associated with Yhwh's recurring declaration that this judgement was enacted "for the sake of my name." This ties this aspect of Ezekiel's trauma account into its widely recognised interest in defending Yhwh's continuing power and authority.[30] Although one interpretation of Jerusalem's surrender to Nebuchadnezzar would have been to blame the inferiority of its patron deity (Yhwh) compared to the deity of the attacking Babylonians (Marduk), Ezekiel rejects this explanation. Instead, the book argues, Israel has been traumatised by Yhwh, for the sake of Yhwh's reputation – specifically, because Israel flouted Yhwh's authority over Israel through its unfaithfulness. Ezekiel's answer to "Who caused the trauma" is thus both "Yhwh" and

26 See Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living."

27 Smith-Christopher, "Reading Jeremiah as Frantz Fanon," 116–7 (italics original); here and elsewhere, he has observed that much of the literature concerned with the destruction of Jerusalem articulates this kind of "our fault" theology. Cf. Poser, "No Words," 36–8. This phenomenon is characteristic of involuntary migrants; on this see Malkki, *Purity and Exile*. For discussion with reference to Ezekiel, see Crouch, *Israel and Judah*, 65–73.

28 Alexander, *Trauma*, 19.

29 Ezek 6:7, 10, 13–14; 7:4, 9, 27; 11:10, 12, 15–16; 12:20; 13:9, 14, 21; 14:8; 15:7; 16:62; 20:20, 26, 38, 42, 44; 22:16, 22; 23:49; 24:24, 27; 25:5, 7, 11, 14, 17; 26:6; 28:22–24, 26; 29:6, 9, 16, 21; 30:8, 19, 25–26; 32:15; 33:29; 34:27; 35:4, 9, 15; cf.2:5; 5:13; 14:23; 17:24; 20:9, 12; 21:5; 35:11–12; 36:11, 23, 36, 38; 37:6, 13–14, 28; 38:16, 23; 38:23; 39:6–7, 22–23, 28.

30 Ezek 20:9, 14, 22, 44; 36:22 cf. 20:39; 36:20–21, 23; 39:7, 25. Note the particular prominence of this concern in the historical litany of Ezek 20 and in the restoration chapters of Ezek 36–9.

"Israel." The traumatic events occurred in response to Israelite behaviour – and thus in one sense Israel was the source of its own trauma – but Yhwh was ultimately the one who did the injuring.[31]

Ezekiel's defiant interpretation of "what actually happened" in terms that deny Babylonian responsibility and place the blame for Israel's trauma on Israel's own shoulders is why such a high percentage of the book is concerned with historically orientated narration. As is widely observed, the historical lens through which Ezekiel views Israel's past is far more negative than any other historical recitation preserved within the extant Hebrew Bible. Precisely because it is such a radically negative re-envisioning of Israel's past, Ezekiel is obliged to narrate and re-narrate it, hammering away at its audience's defences until this heavily revised and insistently negative version of Israel's past becomes accepted by its audience as an authoritative explanation of the catastrophic events that they have experienced. When Alexander says that "the truth of a cultural script depends not on its empirical accuracy, but on its symbolic power," it is a reminder that the historical accuracy of Ezekiel's narration of Israel's past is not the point: the point is that this way of narrating addresses the threat to Israelite identity posed by Israel's defeat at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, and the deportations to Babylonia, in a way that integrates those experiences into a meaningful representation of collective Israelite identity.[32] Whether Ezekiel 20's narrative of Israel's behaviour in Egypt and after is an accurate depiction of Israel's actions is largely irrelevant. The aim of Ezekiel's account is to make meaning, rather than report facts.

Although the construction of a new master narrative is critical to the meaning-making process of cultural trauma, this does not mean that the construction of such a narrative is always smooth sailing. Rather, it is typically "a complex and multivalent symbolic process that is contingent, contested, and sometimes highly polarizing."[33] The book's fiery rhetoric, as it seeks to present its account of Israel's past as the correct one, epitomises the contested nature of cultural trauma construction. In concrete terms, the success of Ezekiel's new master narrative depended on the successful rebuttal of two alternative accounts: first, the narrative given by those left in Jerusalem, who contend that the deportation of Jehoiachin and others to Babylonia in 597 was an expression of divine judgement on the deportees but an expression of divine favour for those left behind and, second, the narrative offered by those in Babylonia who believe that their presence there is due not to their own sins but to the sins of their ancestors. The latter is rebutted most explicitly in Ezekiel 18, which declares that divine judgement is not applied to subsequent generations but only to the generation that sinned, and thus the generation that has been deported must (also) have sinned. The former is rebutted more systematically through Ezekiel's depiction of those left in Jerusalem as thoroughly contaminated by apostasy and as continuing to engage in sinful behaviour (e.g. Ezek 8–11), and as thus doomed to destruction in the coming final judgement on Jerusalem.

Whether "what actually happened" is even a question that ought to be couched in the past tense is itself a point of contention within the book. Whereas those in Jerusalem are reported to believe that the city's surrender and the deportation of Jehoiachin and other elites in 597 was the end of the matter, and that those remaining in the city are Yhwh's favoured people (11:15; 33:24), Ezekiel contends that the crisis was still ongoing between 597 and 586: those who were taken to Babylonia were extracted from the city prior to its final destruction specifically in order to save them from that final devastation. Moreover, as the book narrates "what is actually happening" – the book's internal dating system couches most of its arguments as though they were occurring in the moment, between the first and the final surrender – it constructs the deportees' time in Babylonia as a period of purification, necessary in order to purge the people of the sins that have brought Yhwh's judgement down upon them and make them worthy to be restored to Jerusalem (36:16–33). Whereas those in Jerusalem are said to view the deportees as already cut off from Israel's story, Ezekiel declares that the story of the deportees *is* Israel's story.

The question of "what actually happened" (or "what is actually happening") is thus for the book of Ezekiel intimately connected to the second and third questions involved in cultural trauma construction,

31 On self-blame as a coping strategy among trauma victims, see Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 68–9.
32 Alexander, *Trauma*, 4.
33 Ibid., 17.

namely, "What group of persons were affected by this traumatizing pain?"[34] and "To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations experience identification with the immediately victimized group?"[35] The immediate victims, as far as the book of Ezekiel is concerned, are the elites of Jerusalem that were deported with Jehoiachin to Babylonia in 597. The general population of Judah is not of interest at all; of interest, but only in a negative sense, are those left in Jerusalem who were. The latter, Ezekiel insists, are not (and will not become) victims of this particular trauma. Insofar as the book is simultaneously transforming the story of Israel in light of 597, it constructs a narrative that explicitly excludes those left in Judah from the community called Israel.

The narrowness of Ezekiel's definition of who constitutes the victims of the 597 catastrophe, when that catastrophe is construed as traumatic, is communicated by and has consequences for the book's language regarding Israel. As soon as the catastrophe is deemed essential to Israelite identity, not everyone who was previously part of Israel is still included in Israel: only those who have experienced the trauma of deportation to Babylonia now qualify as Israelite. That is, because "Israel" has been redefined in relation to the traumatic events of deportation and resettlement, those who remain in Jerusalem – those who did not experience those events – no longer qualify as "Israel." The book of Ezekiel's new master narrative of Israelite identity thus explicitly excludes many of those who previously laid claim to that identity.

That this marks a decisive change in the construction of Israelite identity is apparent from the extent to which the book struggles with terminology: as it seeks to narrow "Israel" to only those with Ezekiel in Babylonia, it is obliged to find alternative language for those left in Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 11, for example, "the whole house of Israel" is explicitly identified as only the members of Ezekiel's community (lit. "your brothers") in exile in Tel Abib. This deportee community is "the whole house of Israel, *all of it*": no one not in Babylonia is part of Israel any more. Those left behind are now merely "inhabitants of Jerusalem" (11:14). Similarly, in Ezekiel 12, "the prince in Jerusalem and all the house of Israel" in Jerusalem (12:10) are progressively downgraded until they become merely "the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the homeland of Israel" (12:19). These people may live in Israel's homeland, but they no longer themselves count as "Israel." By the climax of the book, when a messenger comes to report that "the city has fallen" (33:21), these inhabitants of Jerusalem are merely "the inhabitants of those waste places" (33:24). At stake in these linguistic machinations is not only the name "Israel," but the land, status, and traditions of Israel. The book of Ezekiel's contention is that only the deportees in Babylonia have a rightful claim to any of these: "Israel" has been transformed by 597 in a way that means that only those in Babylonia – those who have experienced the trauma of exile – are its true heirs.

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The extent to which the book of Ezekiel succeeds in its symbolic re-narration of Israelite identity is open to debate. On the one hand, the book has survived more than two millennia; its re-interpretation of Israel's cultural repertoire in response to Jerusalem's defeat was evidently successful enough as a meaning-making endeavour to merit preservation. On the other, its extreme negativity continues to stand out within the canon that has kept it: other narrations of Israelite history, including the epic account contained in the Pentateuch, construct Israelite history and Israelite identity in far more positive ways.

Yet, though few canonical texts outside Ezekiel are quite so overtly negative regarding Israel's history, its reckoning of Jerusalem's fall as fundamentally significant for the construal of Israelite identity resonates loud and clear. With few exceptions, the experience of deportation and life in Babylonia becomes the *sine qua non* of Israelite identity: only those who have it may count themselves as true members of a post-597 Israel. As a construction of the cultural significance of trauma, then, the book of Ezekiel was a remarkable success. Ever after, the events of 597 were construed not simply as practically and politically catastrophic, but as *traumatic*: the new master narrative placed them front and centre, with indelible and profound consequences of Israel's self-understanding.

34 Ibid., 18.
35 Ibid., 18–9.

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