

Article

The Continuity of the Cult at Bethel after Exile

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Abstract: In this paper, as I follow Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp's argument regarding the continuity of the cult at Bethel in the post-exilic period, I argue that polemics between Bethel and Jerusalem reflect the obvious dichotomy between remanees and returnees (golah) in the post-exilic period. In order to prove the continuity of the cult of Bethel, first and foremost, I investigate the identity of the delegations from Bethel in Zech 7:2; in light of the context of Zech 8:20-23, I suggest that the identity of the delegations is composed of people from the city of Bethel. By using the derogatory idiomatic expressions about Bethel, the scribes belong to the community of Yehud must have sought a resolution. In other words, since their identity was based on Judah, they must have intentionally attempted to denounce Bethel, which represents the cult of Israel. I examine the scribes' endeavors by investigating the ambiguous position of the Benjaminites and Bethel's geographical position.

Keywords: Bethel; Yehud; Josiah; Zechriah; the post-exilic period

1. Introduction

The city of Bethel, one of the major shrines in the Hebrew Bible, played an important political and religious role in Israel. Jeroboam ben Nebat, the first king of northern Israel, also set up his first shrine at Bethel as a function of the political and religious center (1 Kings 12:32). Despite its significant role in the history of ancient Israel, Bethel ("house of God") was criticized by biblical scribes and even pejoratively called "Beth-Aven" ("house of wickedness or iniquity", Hos 4:15; 5:8; 10:5) or "Bochim" ("those who cry", Judges 2:5). Why, given its political and religious significance, did Bethel become a main target of ridicule in the Hebrew Bible? Are there any explanations for the derogatory usage of Bethel in the Hebrew Bible?

Many scholars have long discussed the theological meaning of Bethel from the perspective of the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH). F. M. Cross contends that the pre-exilic editor (Dtr¹) introduces the negative image of Bethel (1 Kings 12-13) to provide the platform for Josiah's reform (2 Kings 23:15-20), but the exilic editor (Dtr²) modified this again for his community (Cross 1973, pp. 278-89). By the same token, Marvin A. Sweeney argues that the DtrH's negative approach to Jeroboam and the altar at Bethel serves the Josianic DtrH by pointing to Josiah as the figure who will eventually destroy the Bethel altar, ridding the land of Jeroboam's sins (Sweeney 2013, p. 179). By destroying the northern kingdom's representative shrine, Bethel, it is apparent that the Deuteronomist expects the centralization of Jerusalem insofar as Jerusalem functions as Yahweh's chosen place according to Deuteronomy (Deut. 12-16).

What these scholars seem to miss, however, is the fact that Bethel continued its religious function after the exile, even though the bible's historiographical texts describe Josiah's destruction of Bethel (2 Kings 23:15). More recently, scholars have discerned the existence of Bethel after the exile with archaeological and extra-biblical resources. Because of the settlement continuity in the region of Benjamin during the transition from the Iron Age to the Babylonian and Persian periods, Oded Lipschits argues that Bethel continued to be inhabited (Lipschits 2003, p. 349). More recently, Lipschits criticized the archaeological and historical conclusions by Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz (Lipschitz 2017, pp. 233-46).



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Lipschits insists that their conclusion was based upon only a few sherds of the site. He argues that the cult place of Bethel should be considered rather than the site of Bethel. In a similar vein, Joseph Blenkinsopp draws the conclusion that during the Babylonian interim (586-515), Bethel served as the official sanctuary of Judah, Benjamin, and perhaps also the central hill country (Blenkinsopp 2003, p. 101).

In this paper, as I follow Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp's argument of Bethel's continuity in the post-exilic period, I argue that polemics between Bethel and Jerusalem reflect the dichotomy between remainees and returnees (*golah*) in the post-exilic period. In order to prove the continuity of the cult at Bethel, first and foremost, I investigate the identity of the delegations from Bethel in Zech 7:2; in light of the context of Zech 8:20-23, I suggest that the identity of the delegations is composed of people from the city of Bethel. Bethel could have played an important role as a substitute for the sanctuary in Jerusalem in the wake of the infringement of the Imperial power, although the archeological evidence is meager. However, as the religious and political importance of Jerusalem, with the support of the Persian Empire, was highlighted, the sanctuary at Bethel would have been weakened. It is the image of the gold calf at Bethel in 1 Kings 12 through the association with the Exodus narrative (Exod 32) that reveals to us the setting in which the remnants looked for freedom from the elite returnees from Jerusalem. By using the derogatory idiomatic expressions about Bethel, the scribes in the community of Yehud must have sought a resolution within their community. In other words, since their identity was based on Judah, they must have intentionally attempted to denounce Bethel, which represents the cult of Israel. I examine scribes' revisions by investigating the ambiguous position of the Benjaminites and Bethel's geographical position. According to the biblical text, Bethel belongs to the Benjaminites (Josh 18:11-13) as well as the Ephraimites (Josh 16:1-2). At Jerusalem, Rehoboam from the southern kingdom announced his new kingdom, consisting of two tribes: Judah and Benjamin (1 Kings 12:21-23). In contrast to Rehoboam in Jerusalem, Jeroboam ben Nebat from the northern kingdom, the Ephraimite, established a cult center at Bethel (1 Kings 12:32). Furthermore, Bethel's close geographical proximity to Jerusalem led to confusion within the communities of Yehud. Regardless of Bethel's political province in the northern Kingdom of Israel, an unnamed faithful man from Judah visits an old prophet in Bethel (1 Kings 13), and the Judahite prophet Amos preaches invective against Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (Amos 7:10-17). This offers evidence as to how the Judean communities commute between Jerusalem and Bethel for their religious purposes. From this ambiguous position of the Benjaminites and Bethel's geographical proximity to Jerusalem, the scribes had to create their new identity as one Israel in the post-exilic period. I deal with this issue with socio-historical methods.

2. Archaeological Source for Bethel

While biblical texts have been a primary source for the reconstruction of specific historical events at Bethel, archaeological sources have a lesser role in it. Scholars have long studied Bethel in the biblical text to prove its existence. In this section, I introduce scholars' archaeological evidence for Bethel, which is especially identified with Beitin. The archaeological discoveries at Beitin have proved scribal activities and material culture at Bethel from the Early Bronze Ages to Roman period. But there is still no conclusive decision as to whether the northern tribes continued their activities at Bethel in the sixth century BCE.

Since Edward Robinson declared that Bethel is identified with the modern village of Beitin, approximately 10.5 miles north of Jerusalem to the northeast of Ramallah, W. F. Albright and James L. Kelso led excavations there from 1934 to 1968 (Kelso 1968). At the outset, Robinson examined how Beitin is linguistically identified with Bethel on the basis that the use of the final *n* for the final *l* was clearly substantiated (Rainey 2007, p. 270). Then, following geographical distance (Bethel is 12 Roman miles north of Jerusalem on the road to Neapolis) in the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius (ca. 260-339), Robinson concluded that Beitin is exactly identified with Bethel since the distance from Beitin to Jerusalem was three hours forty-five minutes with horses. Albright and Kelso began their excavation at Beitin,

based on such assumptions by Robinson. Their approach to Beitin was to prove the biblical textual source (Livingston 2003, pp. 187–88).¹ Having excavated during four campaigns (1934, 1954, 1957, 1960), they discovered that Beitin is sitting on a tell that was occupied in the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Ages and also has Iron Age I and II and Hellenistic and Roman period remains (Rainey 2007, p. 269). However, David Livingston, who noted that a suitable site for Ai has not been found east of Beitin, criticized Albright and Kelso's identification of Bethel with Beitin as having no archaeological evidence (Livingston 2003, p. 185). Nevertheless, Rainey, who found church ruins from Crusader and Byzantine times that match the Christian traditions about churches at or near Bethel, emphasized the identification of Bethel with Beitin (Rainey 2007, p. 269).

Regardless of scholarly discussion of the identification of Bethel with Beitin, if Beitin is identified with Bethel, we need to resolve our main issue of whether material evidence for Bethel continued in the post-exilic period. Kelso concluded that Bethel was destroyed in a great conflagration either at the hands of the Babylonian Nabonidus or shortly afterwards at the hands of the Persians, perhaps in the chaotic period preceding Darius (Kelso 1968, p. 51). More recently, in their article, "Reevaluating Bethel", Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz revisited Albright and Kelso's archaeological evidence for Bethel and then commented on its biblical associations (Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2009, pp. 33–48). They argue that evidence for activity at Bethel in the Babylonian, Persian and early Hellenistic period is very meager (Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2009, p. 45). By contrast, on the basis of demographic continuity through the middle of the fifth century, Lipschitz insists that occupation at Bethel (the Benjamin province) was uninterrupted but only gradually declined over the fifth and fourth century (Lipschitz 2005, p. 31). By the same token, Blenkinsopp notes that Bethel, closer to Mizpah, which was the center of the Babylonian administration of the region, obtained the favored status of the Benjamin region and served as the official sanctuary in the Neo-Babylonian period, although he acknowledges that his archaeological sources for the early Persian period are meager (Blenkinsopp 2003, p. 99). These scholars highlighted Bethel's polemical status against Jerusalem. Thus, when Jerusalem was rebuilt under the Persian Empire, Bethel's substitute role for Jerusalem must have been reconsidered. Despite its scanty archaeological evidence for Bethel, their assumptions are reasonable because the name of Bethel still occurred twice even after the post-exilic period in the biblical text (Zech. 7:2; Ezra 2:29).

3. Extra-Biblical Textual Source for Bethel

The extra-biblical textual source for Bethel was the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea (ca. 260–339), before Richard Steiner provided his transliteration of part of Amherst 63. Scholars have discerned the geographical information of Bethel from it but had difficulty learning about the northern tribes' life at Bethel, especially the deportees of the Assyrian Empire. However, Papyrus Amherst 63 has shed new light on the history of deportees from the northern Kingdom of Israel in the period of the Assyrian Empire.

Having analyzed Amherst 63, Richard Steiner concluded that Amherst 63 refers to rituals resembling those of the Babylonian Akitu festival but provides us with clues to understanding the setting of 2 Kings 17:33, in which the people were deported by the Assyrians to Samaria, and especially the cult at Bethel (Steiner 1997, p. 206–7). In reconstructing the history in Amherst 63, Steiner suggests that the Assyrian King, Ashurbanipal (669–630 BCE.), who captured Rashu in his campaign against Elam, deported its inhabitants (like the Elamites from Susa mentioned in Ezra 4:9–10) to the Assyrian province of Samaria (Steiner 1997, p. 205). Most or all of them wound up in Bethel, joining the foreign colonists settled there by earlier Assyrian kings (Steiner 1997, p. 205). In Amherst 63, the deportees living in Bethel left their home due to the drying up of a spring and migrated to Syene, the southern border of Egypt. Of particular interest is the Rasha community's description of Bethel (Steiner 1997, p. 204). In their dialogue, Bethel was renowned for its "ivory house" (cf. the *bty šn* of Amos 3:14–15). Furthermore, their description of the prac-

tice at Bethel (“*y.š.k^m*, will kiss” and “*.kryk^m*, your calves”) reminds us of Hosea’s derision toward kissing the golden calves at the Bethel sanctuary (Hos 13:2) (Steiner 1997, p. 205).

Steiner’s comparison of Amherst 63 with the biblical text has led to the possibility of Bethel’s continuity after the post-exilic period. In his article, “Counting Calves at Bethel”, Mark Smith re-analyzes Columns XI and XII regarding the Israelite cult at Bethel in Amherst 63 (Smith 2007, p. 385). In particular, he paid attention to the Israelite prayer in Column XI: Lines 11–19, which parallels Psalm 20. Following Steiner’s assumption that the Israelite prayer was a descendant of one used in Jeroboam’s temple in Bethel, Mark Smith presupposed that an Israelite cult was re-contextualized in a non-Israelite usage and the cult of Bethel continued following the fall of the northern Kingdom of Israel (Smith 2007, p. 385). Recently, Bob Becking also argued that Papyrus Amherst 63 reflects a syncretistic form of religion from an earlier age and shows the continuation of the worship of the god Bethel (Becking 2020, p. 46).

Overall, access to extra-biblical textual sources has increased since Richard Steiner’s comprehensive analysis of Amherst 63, and subsequently scholarship has been able to postulate the possibility of the continuity of the cult of Bethel after the post-exilic period.

4. Bethel’s Continuity after the Post-Exilic Period—Textual Evidence (Zech. 7:2)

So far, we have discussed that archaeological evidence for Bethel’s continuity after the post-exilic period is still controversial, but Amherst 63 provides us with clues to understanding Bethel’s ritual continuity and its influence on non-Israelite cultic practices. In this section, I investigate Bethel’s cultic activities after the post-exilic period from the biblical textual source. The interpretation of Zech 7:2 sheds light on our understanding of Bethel’s continuity since the historical context of Zech 7:2 indicates the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem from 518 BCE. It can be translated literally as follows:

ושלה בית־אל שר־אצר ורגם מלך ואנשיו לחלות את־פני יהוה

And he sent Bethel, Sharezer,² and Regem-melech, and his men/to entreat the Faces of Yahweh

In Zech 7:2, the delegation from Bethel most likely comprises the Bethelites, who continued to worship during the exile. Verse 2a is one of the most difficult texts to translate. The problem is in deciding what the subject and the object of the verb “*xlv* (sent)” is in v. 2a. Some scholars insist that the subject is “Bethel-Sharezer and Regemmelek, and his men” because there is one Akkadian equivalent of Bethel-Sharezer from the late Neo-Babylonian period.³ Hyatt asserts that the subject of v. 2 is “Bethel-Sharezer” because as a native Babylonian, “*Bīt-ili-shar-usur*” is the Akkadian equivalent of the biblical “Bethel-sharezer”. He concludes “Bethel-sharezer” served as a member in the temple of Eanna in Erech, and a member of “the devotees (the *Nithînîm*)”. Thus, Hyatt insists that “Bethel-Sharezer” is a part of the delegation from Babylonia (Hyatt 1937, pp. 393–94). However, as Kenneth Ristau points out, if the subject is “Bethel-Sharezer and Regemmelek and his men”, it would be reflected with a plural rather than singular verb (Ristau 2009, p. 205).

A second approach translates v. 2a by emphasizing the place “Bethel”: “Sharezer, Regem-melech and his men sent to Bethel”. Blenkinsopp assumes “Sharezer, Regem-melech and his men” to be the compound subject and “Bethel” the destination, a construction supported by the LXX, the Syriac version, and the Targum (Blenkinsopp 1998, p. 32). Based on the archeological excavation of Beitin (Bethel), Blenkinsopp points out that Bethel took over as the imperially designated center of worship in the early Persian period until it lost out to Jerusalem.⁴ Hence, he insists that Bethel survived the reforming zeal of Josiah (2 Kings 23:15–18) to play an important role in the affairs of the province of Judah after the Babylonian conquest (Blenkinsopp 1998, p. 35). In this regard, Blenkinsopp’s study of Bethel is valuable because it emphasizes the role of Bethel in Zech 7. However, it is difficult to use Bethel as the accusative without the prepositional prefix (לָא).

Thus, the most plausible solution is to regard Bethel as the subject and the other names as the object. Of course, there is no example of Bethel as a single subject in the Old Testa-

ment. However, Hoffman insists that Bethel as a person's name is to be preferred, understanding it as elliptical language or as metonymy (Hoffman 2003, p. 201). Both the NIV and the NRSV translate the subject of v. 2a as "the people of Bethel". Although the Masoretic text does not include "people", it is possible to assume that "Bethel" also means "the inhabitants of Bethel" as metonymy. I agree with Hoffman's analysis because of the similarities in the Hebrew syntax. For example, according to Middlemas' analysis, the city of Gilgal appears to stand for its populace when it is spoken of as going into exile in Amos 5:5 (Middlemas 2009, p. 184). A similar reference can be found in Judges 12:5: "and Gilead (the Gileadites) held the fords of the Jordan".

Furthermore, both the context of Zech 7-8 and the Hebrew disjunction accent support Bethel as the subject. Just as in Zech 7:2a delegations came to Jerusalem to entreat Yahweh, so in Zech 8:20-23 many nations and cities come to Jerusalem to entreat Yahweh. This context makes us assume that the subject of 7:2a would be the name of a city. Moreover, the Hebrew disjunction accent "Zaqeph (:)" separates "Bethel" from "Sharezer".⁵ Therefore, it is likely that the subject of v. 2a is Bethel and the other names are the object of v. 2a.

There is still much controversy among scholars as to what the subject of v. 2a is. It is evident that Zechariah emphasizes the role of Jerusalem as the cultic center. In Zech. 7:2, the delegations from Bethel came to Jerusalem "to entreat the faces of Yahweh".⁶ The phrase "to entreat the faces of Yahweh" is repeated in Zech 8:20, 21. This repetition of the phrase forms an *inclusio* in Zech 7-8, and both sections (Zech 7:1-3 and 8:20-23) highlight the role of Jerusalem as the cultic center. Furthermore, in the exhortations of Zech 8:1-13, Zechariah emphasizes Yahweh's return to Jerusalem and the recovery of Jerusalem. Hence, we can see that this emphasis on Jerusalem as the cultic center is the key element of Zech 7-8.

5. The Reconstruction of the History of Bethel

5.1. Did Josiah's Reform Totally Destroy Bethel?

If Josiah did totally destroy cultic practices at Bethel, the veracity of the continuity of the cult at Bethel in the post-exilic period would be questionable. Nevertheless, our archaeological, extra-biblical, and biblical textual sources suggest the continuity of the cult at Bethel in the post-exilic period. If so, what really happened to Bethel, when Josiah pulled down its altar and burned it (2 Kings 23:15-20)? In this section, following the minimalist assumption that Josiah's reform reflects the later Deuteronomist's ideological historiography, I argue that the Deuteronomist must have introduced Josiah's reform at Bethel for the centralization of Jerusalem in the post-exilic period but did not totally destroy Bethel based on 2 Kings 23:18.

Many scholars have long noticed that Josiah's reform was added by later editors. Even Miller and Hayes insist that Josiah's religious reform beyond Jerusalem and the boundaries of Judah was highly doubtful (Miller and Hayes 2006, p. 459). Likewise, Lester Grabbe insists that Josiah's reform would be an invention of the Deuteronomist since in Jeremiah's overall message Jeremiah did not make comment on Josiah's reform, although Jeremiah's references are remarkably accurate (Grabbe 2007, p. 206). Moreover, Niels P. Lemche also assumes that Josiah's reform is a part of the foundation myth of the later Jewish people, which had its center in Jerusalem and Judah but also advanced a claim on the rest of the country (Lemche 2010, p. 17).

I agree with these scholars' assumption that Josiah's reform was edited by the later Deuteronomists. What these scholars did not deal with, however, is the fact that 2 Kings 23:18 reflects a new harmony between the two separated kingdoms of Israel and Judah. 2 Kings 23:18 can be transliterated as follows:

ואמר הניו לו איש אל ינע עצמתו וימלטו עצמתיו את עצמות הנביא אשר בא משמרון

And he said, "Let him leave-untouched. Let no one touch his-bones!" /and his-bones were left-undisturbed with bones-of-the-prophet who came from-Samaria.

In 2 Kings 23:18, Josiah does not move the bones of the man of God from Judah (cf. 1 Kings 13) and even left it with the bones of the prophet who came from Samaria. When considered Josiah’s religious reform, he should have burned and ground them to powder in the same way that Moses destroyed the calf which Aaron made (Ex. 32:20). Moreover, as Sweeney points out, the Bethel prophet’s provenance from Samaria is anachronistic since Samaria was only built by Omri, long after the reign of Jeroboam ben Nebat (1 Kings 16:24) (Sweeney 2013, p. 449). Josiah’s peculiar order beyond the Deuteronomistic historiography and the anachronistic usage of Samaria should be reconsidered. It was the later editors’ new attempt to consolidate the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Thus, 2 Kings 23:18 provides a possible hypothesis for Bethel’s continuity in the post-exilic period: Josiah did not totally destroy cultic activities at Bethel.

Be that as it may, we still need to resolve the question of why Bethel has become a target of derision in the Hebrew Bible. This can be understood by analyzing the ambiguous position of the Benjaminites in the next section. In order to examine the Benjaminites, I reconstruct their history from the socio-historical method.

5.2. *The Ambiguous Position of the Benjaminites and Bethel’s Geographical Position*

First, as Table 1 illustrates, in the Book of Joshua, Bethel was allotted to both the Benjaminites and the Ephraimites. Second, in the Book of Judges, the men of Judah succeeded in attacking Jerusalem, but the Benjaminites failed to attack Jerusalem. For this reason, the Benjaminites live with the Jebusites, maybe the men of Judah. It is odd that Bethel belongs to the house of Joseph, not to the Benjaminites in Judges 1:22-26. Third, in the Book of 1 Kings, the Benjaminites and the Judahites continued to serve the house of David against other tribes. To understand this ambiguity, Richard Nelson argues that Bethel is located between the north boundary of Benjamin and the fragment of Ephraim’s south border (Nelson 1997, p. 195). Then, he suggests that this northeast Benjamin district would reflect the reign of Josiah, especially Josiah’s political boundary. Thus, Benjaminites towns would be once part of the Kingdom of Israel and then the Assyrian province of Samira, but eventually were included in an expanded Judah, presumably at the time of Josiah (Nelson 1997, p. 214). Perhaps, the biblical texts show us how the Benjaminites, one of the twelve tribes, were gradually assimilated into the Judahites. Hence, the political position of Bethel, one of the Benjaminites towns, was also changed according to the Benjaminites political relationship with the Judahites. This phenomenon is related to the history of ancient Israel.

Table 1. The ambiguous position of the Benjaminites.

The Benjaminites in the Biblical text	
Josh 16:1-3 Josh 18:11-13; 18:20-28	Bethel was allotted to the Ephraimites. Bethel was allotted to the Benjaminites.
Judges 1:21 Judges 1:22-26	The Benjaminites live with the Jebusites in Jerusalem. By contrast, the men of Judah attacked Jerusalem and took it (cf. Judges 1:8) The house of Joseph attacked Bethel.
1 Kings 12:20 1 Kings 12:21	The Israelites made Jeroboam their king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David. Rehoboam mustered the whole house of Judah and the Benjaminites.

In addition to Bethel’s political position, which is influenced by the Benjaminites political change, we need to reconsider Bethel’s geographical proximity to Jerusalem. As we discussed above (See Section 2. Archaeological Sources for Bethel), Bethel is identified with the modern village of Beitin, approximately 10.5 miles north of Jerusalem to the northeast of Ramallah. Given the archeological evidence that the pottery repertoire at northern sites of Beitin includes a considerable number of vessels which depict Judahite characteristics, people must have visited Bethel beyond their political boundary (Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2009, p. 40). Due to Bethel’s close proximity to Jerusalem, we can assume

that many Jews would have traveled from Jerusalem to Bethel without any political prohibition. For instance, an unnamed faithful man from Judah visits an old prophet in Bethel (1 Kings 13), and the Judahite prophet Amos preaches invective against Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (Amos 7:10-17). This would offer evidence of how the Judean communities commuted between Jerusalem and Bethel for their religious purpose. The close proximity from Jerusalem to Bethel sometimes brought benefits from trading. But it must have been difficult for both cities to avoid religious influences on each other.

5.3. *Understanding Bethel, Its Derogatory Expressions in Socio-Historical Context*

Philippe Guillaume, who examines Judges in the light of the Persian period, argues that the Benjaminites resisted the authority of the returnees who were eager to wipe out all traces of the Babylonian period (Guillaume 2007, p. 212). He insists that Bethel and Benjamin resented the gradual but irresistible recovery of Jerusalem as the capital, which means that Mizpah was losing its leading political role (Guillaume 2007, p. 201). For this reason, he stresses that the biblical textual sources criticized Bethel as well as the Benjaminites. In a similar vein, in his recent book, *"The Origins of Biblical Israel"*, Philip Davies investigates how the Judeans identified themselves as "Israel" in the cultural memory of Judean society in the Persian period and even in Hellenistic times (Davies 2007, pp. 173–74). He assumes a Benjaminite memory, probably dominant within the later Kingdom of Israel and later adopted by Judeans, who reconfigured the story of this Israel (Davies 2007, p. 174). He also argues that a Benjaminite/Israelite history was written in Mizpah in the sixth century BCE, and exclusive Judean groups adopted their history in the Persian period (Davies 2007, p. 175). Guillaume and Davies' argument for the Benjaminites and Bethel is cogent because the biblical textual source negatively evaluates the Benjaminites and Bethel but not other tribes and their cities. Not only can social and historical methods explain how different policies among the Imperial powers of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia had impacts on the Jews, but also how the Imperial powers precipitated the dichotomy between Jerusalem and Bethel. The post-exilic community must have had traumatic memories of life under the Imperial powers.

When we analyze the Imperial powers' different policies from the socio-historical perspective, we can understand the rivalry between Jerusalem and Bethel. Jon Berquist emphasizes that the external pressures by the Imperial powers combined with internal factors of continuity and opposition among the Jewish community in the post-exilic period to shape the identity of Yehud (Berquist 1995, p. 10). According to Berquist's analysis, the Assyrian empire conquered one territory and stole booty. This policy made the colonies resentful, not loyal. On the other hand, by using its army, Babylonia controlled the population and relocated people, but only those who had skills, not all the people of the land. In other words, the Babylonian Imperial administrative strategy involved centralization. This spatial movement gave rise to the expansion of Babylon. However, policies of the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires sought the maximization of tribute and brought excessive violence to their colonies. Thus, in contrast to previous empires, the Persian King Cyrus moved the dependent Imperial populations closer to the peripheries of the Persian Empire (the Cyrus cylinder, Ezra 1:2-4; 5:13-15) (Berquist 1995, p. 25). In so doing, the Persian Empire imposed taxes on small nations so that it could become more stable and productive than any of the other empires. These different strategies must have brought enormous social conflicts between the returnees from exile and the remainees. In one sense, Second Isaiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah are pro-Persian because they encouraged rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem, which functions as the center for the collection and redistribution of taxes for the Persian Empire (Berquist 1995, p. 31). On the other hand, the poor remnant, especially the Benjaminites, relied on Bethel for a long time after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. But as the political and religious influence of Jerusalem grew significantly with the support of the Persian Empire, cultic activities at Bethel must have weakened. Priests of Bethel must have sought their positions after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (Zech 7:2-3).

The returnees, who mostly consisted of the educated elites in the Persian Empire, arrived at the de-urbanized city of Jerusalem in the wake of the material devastation of the Imperial powers. Although most Benjaminites maintained their economic status in such a ruralized city, their land must have belonged to the Persian Empire, not to their patrimony (Kelle and Moore 2011, p. 185). In this situation, the schism between the pro-Persian returnees (Jerusalem) and the poor remnant (Bethel) would result in social stratification. Thus, the Persian Empire's economic oppression of its colonies as well as the inner conflicts between the Judean communities must have traumatized most Jews.

In addition, in order to consolidate Jerusalem's political and religious position, the educated returnees would deride various cultic activities at Bethel with their writing. Since the Persian Empire provided economic support for peripheral countries to write their own history, the educated returnees in Jerusalem wrote derogatory expressions against Bethel, one of the Benjaminite towns. By criticizing them, they must have looked forward to the centralization of worship in the temple of Jerusalem.

6. Conclusions

In reconstructing the history of Bethel, I have considered three types of sources: archaeological (Beitin), extra-biblical (Amherst 63), and biblical textual (the relationship between the Benjaminites and Bethel in the Hebrew Bible). Lipschits' demographic investigation of the Benjaminite towns makes a case for Bethel's continuity after the post-exilic period, though archaeological evidence for Bethel in the post-exilic period is meager. Furthermore, the Rasha community's description of Bethel in Amherst 63 has shed light on our understanding of cultic activities at Bethel after the post-exilic period. In order to prove Bethel's continuity in the biblical textual source, I have analyzed the subject of Zech 7:2 and found that the subject of Zech. 7:2 is translated as "the people of Bethel".

Finally, having analyzed Josiah's reform, I have found that it reflects the late compilers' expectation under the Imperial powers; as educated elite returnees who supported the Persian Empire, they described the ambiguous position of the Benjaminites and Bethel's close proximity to Jerusalem. Since the returnees wanted to highlight the centralization of the temple in Jerusalem after the post-exilic period, their strong derogatory expressions against the cultic activities at Bethel were essential. Their endeavors must have caused Benjaminite resentment but nevertheless provided the groundwork for all Judean society to seek their identity as one Israel.

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Notes

- ¹ As Moore and Kelle point out, Albright's main purpose was to combine an unparalleled knowledge of ancient Near Eastern languages, culture, and archeology with the desire to use this knowledge to defend the assumption that the biblical text was reliable by asserting that a text could be considered historically reliable if its details were plausible. See (Kelle and Moore 2011, p. 14).
- ² "Sharezer (rcarf)" also occurs as one of Sennacherib's sons who assassinated him in the Temple of Nisroch (2Kings 19:37 and Isa. 37:38) in the Assyrian period. Thus, Sweeney insists that Jews in this period would adopt Akkadian names during the period when they had been exiled to Babylonia and perhaps assimilated to some extent into its culture. (Sweeney 2000, p. 638).
- ³ According to HALOT, "Bethel-shrezer" is a hybridized noun with "Bethel" as a theophoric adjective. It could be read as "May god Bethel protect the king". See HALOT, 1353. Ackroyd also translated v. 2a as "Then Bethel-sharezer the Rab-mag of the king and his men sent". (Ackroyd 1968, p. 206). Likewise, Petersen followed Ackroyd's translation except that he translated "his men" as "their men", referring to a plural entity. (Petersen 1984, p. 281).

- ⁴ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Judaeen Priesthood”, 32. Meyers and Meyers also insist that the subject of v. 2a is “Bethel” based on the archeological discovery by W.F. Albright. They assume that a substantial number of exiles from Bethel and Ai (Ezr 2:28) undoubtedly constituted a significant group that would be disposed to accept the reemerging power and authority of the Jerusalem temple establishment. (Meyers and Meyers 1987, p. 382).
- ⁵ Merrill also indicates that the Hebrew accent tradition separates “Bethel” from “Sharezer”. (Merrill 1994, p. 183).
- ⁶ The Hebrew word “to entreat (hlx)” occurs 11 times in the Old Testament, referring to the representative’s prayer or sacrifice, asking Yahweh’s help with dangerous situations (Ex. 32:11; 1 Sam 13:12; 1 Kings 13:6; 2 Kings 13:4; Jer 26:19; Zech 7:2; 8:21; Mal 1:9; Ps 119:58; Dan 9:13; 2 Chr 33:12). See HALOT, 317.

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