in Genesis 1, actually utilizes a transformed (democratized) version of Mesopotamian ideology in order to subvert this very ideology.[124]

The Contribution of an Exilic Social Context

It is even possible, despite the ambiguous evidence available to us (see chapter 3), that this alternative biblical vision received its most decisive formulation (specifically, the use of *imago Dei* terminology) in the sixth century B.C.E., when Israel was directly confronted with the social embodiment of Mesopotamian ideology in the form of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Although there is admittedly no clear proof for an exilic social context for Genesis 1, I do not believe that such a context can be definitively ruled out.

Even though Mesopotamian ideology undoubtedly presented an important challenge to Israel's faith prior to the exile, the challenge would have been significantly intensified by the direct confrontation with the institutions and social landscape of Babylonia that exile represented. It was one thing to have negotiated with Mesopotamian definitions of reality at a distance, at the periphery of the empire. It was quite another to be displaced from Judah and resettled at the empire's heart, daily confronted with an alien, imperial culture, with its own social order, institutions and symbolic univese. The exiles would have been subjected to the constant pressure of socialization and inculturation into the Mesopotamian worldview, which was embodied in the very fabric of the society in which they now found themselves.

Compounding this more direct confrontation with Mesopotamian ideology than Israel would have previously experienced was the trauma of profound, multilayered loss represented by exile. In the most basic sense, exile meant the loss of the land promised by God to Abraham and his descendants, a land that Israel had occupied for over six hundred years.[125] Exile also meant the ending of the two treasured and defining institutions of Israel, namely, the Davidic monarchy (sealed by God's promissory oath to David, according to 2 Samuel 7, some four hundred years earlier) and the Jerusalem temple (built and dedicated by David's son, Solomon). These twin institutions functioned as symbols of God's abiding presence in and blessing on Israel. Taken

124. A point made by Phyllis Bird, "Sexual Differentiation and Divine Image in the Genesis Creation Texts," 22 n.12.

125. Although loss of land for the exiles took the form of deportation or physical alienation, for those left in the land the alienation was sociopolitical, in that Judah was reduced to the status of a subservient Babylonian province.

together, these losses of institutions and land constituted the end of Israel as a nation.

But the loss signaled by exile was more than geographical and institutional. It was more, even, than psychological, the gut-wrenching experience of being uprooted from all that was familiar and being forced to resettle in an alien land and culture, a thousand miles from home.[126] Layered upon these losses—and deeply intertwined with them—was the loss of Israel's symbolic world. The physical facticity and psychological trauma of exile were accompanied, in other words, by a crisis of meaning.

Whereas the book of Lamentations is the classic statement of loss from the perspective of those left in the land, Psalm 137 is a communal lament of the exiles:

> By the rivers of Babylon—
> there we sat down and there we wept
> when we remembered Zion.
> On the willows there
> we hung up our harps.
> For there our captors
> asked us for songs,
> and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
> "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
> How could we sing the LORD's song
> in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1–4 NRSV)

The point is not that the exiles were literally tortured or brutalized on an ongoing basis (we simply do not have enough information to reconstruct an accurate picture of the actual social situation of the exiles). Nevertheless, Psalm 137 realistically portrays the quandary of an Israelite exile unable to sing anymore a song of Zion (like Psalm 46 with its confidence in YHWH's protection of Jerusalem) now that the city had been destroyed.

Indeed, what now was Israel to make of God's ancient promises to Abraham, promises not only of a land but also of a special destiny for his descendants? What of God's eternal oath to preserve the Davidic dynasty, in light of its evident demise? What of God's presence among the people if the temple (and its sacrificial apparatus) no longer existed? How could Israel's narrative of historical destiny, a story of redemption and liberation (focused on the exodus from bondage in Egypt and incorporating the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem temple) turn

126. Babylon was about six hundred miles east of Jerusalem as the crow flies. The actual journey, which would have followed the northeastward curve of the Fertile Crescent, would have been closer to one thousand miles.

into a narrative of defeat and new bondage? Had YHWH the God of Israel failed? Had God been unable to protect Israel from its enemies? Was YHWH bested by Marduk, patron-deity of Babylon? Could Israel's God be trusted anymore? Was this God worthy of Israel's allegiance any longer?[127]

But beyond the specifically theological crisis (concerning God's power and trustworthiness)[128] was an accompanying crisis of *identity*. As Brian Walsh and I have argued, a people's sense of *identity* ("who are we?"), which includes their sense of calling and purpose, is deeply implicated in their sense of the *world*—the place or context, in the broadest sense—to which they belong ("where are we?").[129] Thus, a faith crisis generated by the loss of Israel's symbolic world inevitably led to a crisis of Israelite identity. What, indeed, would it mean to be a member of the chosen people of God in sixth-century exile, when one's familiar world of meaning had been brutally stripped away? Not only would the exiles have been daily confronted with a pervasive understanding of the superiority of Mesopotamian royal urban culture, but the vacuum of their own identity crisis would have made them supremely vulnerable to the Mesopotamian understanding of human identity and purpose.

One of the fundamental questions that the Israelite exiles would have faced, therefore, was whether they were going to acquiesce in the debilitating identity foisted on them by Babylon. According to this identity, the exiles were defined, along with the mass of the Babylonian populace, as powerless and insignificant servants of the gods. But they were, furthermore, the remnants of a conquered and subjugated nation, patently inferior to their civilized conquerors. Acceptance of this identity would have robbed the exiles of a sense of significant human agency and reduced them to perpetual victim status, at the mercy of the gods, the temple system, the king, and the social order of Babylon. But acceptance of this identity would have had repercussions well beyond the disempowerment of the exiles. Acceptance of this definition of identity would have nullified Israel's distinctive communal identity, which had been shaped by a sense of divine election and covenant, rooted in a narrative of redemption from bondage, issuing in a historical mission and destiny among the nations.

The crisis of Babylonian exile can thus be imagined as a traumatic loss of meaning and identity compounded by the confrontation with a vision of human identity alien to the deepest roots of Yahwistic faith. It constituted nothing less than a frontal challenge to Israel's distinctive identity as a "royal priesthood" and "holy nation" (as articulated in Exodus 19:3–6). One can further imagine that this challenge was met, head on, by the affirmation of human agency represented by the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1. If Genesis 1 were written—or heard—in the historical context of Babylonian exile, the *imago Dei* would have come as a clarion call to the people of God to stand tall again with dignity and to take seriously their royal-priestly vocation as God's authorized agents and representatives in the world.

But whenever the notion of humanity as the image of God was first articulated, it constitutes a remarkable theological achievement. In essential continuity with the ethical, religious, and social ideals of earlier Scripture, including the pervasive critique of idolatry and of absolute kingship in Israel, the author of Genesis 1 daringly seized on the bold symbol of the *imago Dei* to restate for a new context Israel's unique insight about being human. In what must be acknowledged as one of the most daring acts of theological imagination within Scripture, this unknown author chose to crystallize the central Israelite insight about being human in a term typically applied only to idols, kings, and priests—*ṣelem ʾĕlōhîm*—and thereby profoundly affected the worldview and theological imagination of generations of biblical readers.

127. Klein discusses questions such as these in *Israel in Exile*, 3–6.

128. While Klein calls the exile a *theological* challenge (ibid., 3), Bruce C. Birch describes it as a *spiritual* crisis in *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 282.

129. See the analysis of the intertwining of identity and world in connection with postmodernity in Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, esp. 56. Walsh and I postulated in our earlier *Transforming Vision*, chaps. 1–2, that all worldviews answer four fundamental worldview questions: "Where are we?" (world), "Who are we?" (identity), "What's wrong?" (evil), and "What's the remedy?" (redemption). When N. T. Wright used our worldview questions in his analysis of first-century Judaism and the early Jesus movement in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress; London: SPCK, 1992), chap. 5, he insightfully suggested that the answers given to the questions of evil and redemption could be better understood as constituting a people's communal narrative, a suggestion that Walsh and I gladly embraced (see *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 63–64, 212 n. 5). Interestingly, James A. Sanders proposes that Israelite identity in the Babylonian exile was bound up with the shaping of Israel's communal narrative of redemption; "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in *Magnalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller Jr.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 531–60, repr. in Sanders's *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), chap. 1.