

PERIL AND PROMISE OF EXILE:
BIBLICAL NARRATIVE SPEAKING TO US TODAY
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How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers, she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.... Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering, all the precious things that were hers in days of old.¹

Old Testament

This outcry of lament vividly articulates the despondency engendered by the catastrophic events of the early sixth century B.C. In exile, the props that had offered political, economic, and ideological security to the people of God proved to be powerless. The temple was destroyed; the dynasty had fallen; the land was lost. A century and a half earlier, the northern kingdom of Israel had undergone a similar calamity at the hands of the Assyrians.² Both eighth-century Israel and sixth-century Judah were left little or nothing to sustain the identity that had been fashioned over centuries. Not only had the covenant people who bore Yahweh's name suffered a devastating blow at the hands of the empire, but Yahweh who bore his people's name had apparently suffered defeat at the hands of the empire's god, Marduk. From all appearances, Marduk was indeed king.

As our biblical ancestors navigated the perilous waters of exile, some are likely to have abandoned the worship of their national deity, Yahweh. However voices soon emerged that sought an alternative to abandonment. These voices dared to engage in sincere lamentation, bold imagination, and honest confession. Over time, these exilic voices were untethered from the single socio-political event of Babylonian exile and fueled the imagination of subsequent generations. Just as Judah had inherited the exilic narrative of the northern kingdom's eighth-century crisis and re-traditioned it in light of their own exilic experience³ so later generations

¹ Lam 1:1-3, 7.

²While the term *exile* is primarily used in relationship to the Babylonian exile of Judah, the same term can be used for the Assyrian exile of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. See 2 Kings 17:7-8 in which the Assyrian king is described as invading the land and carrying away the Israelites to Assyria "because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God...." Noting the even broader understanding of Israelite exile, Smith-Christopher observes that exile can be "defined as the period not only immediately following the ancient Israelite monarchy" but "is typically 'read' as the entire period of non-national Jewish existence—quite literally from 586 BCE until 1948 CE...[Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 9].

³ See David Carr's discussion of the relationship of the Fall of Samaria in 722/721 B.C. to the later re-traditioning process at the time of Babylonian exile. Carr observes that "Hosea offered

have interpreted their exilic experiences in light of Judah's exile. The narratives, poems, sermons, oracles and letters that emerged out of the perilous reality of exile have breathed and continue to breathe promise in seasons of displacement, marginalization, persecution, and cultural shift.⁴

As we reflect upon the biblical metaphor of exile as it speaks into the identity and mission of the Church of the Nazarene in North America, this paper will first explore the manner in which the exilic voices of the Old Testament spoke into Israel and Judah's exile. It will proceed to explore the manner in which the motif of exile thrived and morphed beyond these events and engaged realities faced by the early Jewish and Christian communities.

While various aspects of exile in Old Testament texts would be fruitful for our discussion, I will limit my comments to three areas in which the Old Testament narrative

the Israelites an interpretation of their experience, one in which Yahweh had not lost to the Assyrians but was working through them" [David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 33]. He continues to trace this re-traditioning process by noting that "somehow Hosea's prophecies...found their way south to Judah. It was there, in Judah, that these prophecies of Hosea became the seeds of later Old Testament theology. It was there that Hosea's vision of faithfulness was eventually accepted as a way to engage Judah's communal trauma" (p. 39). For full discussion, see pp. 24-40. In sixth century B.C. Judah, the prophet Jeremiah especially reflects the northern thought of Hosea and the broader Deuteronomistic tradition.

⁴ In recent decades, the biblical motif of exile has spoken in challenging and transforming ways into the context of the North American church. Thirty years ago this year, Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann published his classic text *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* with the desire that his thoughts would become "a contribution to a discussion about vitality in ministry" within the American church which he described then as "fatigued and close to despair" [Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 7]. Brueggemann suggested that the biblical metaphors of "exile and homecoming offer a poignant way to read our cultural-religious situation and to lead us to hopeful imagination" and called upon the American church to participate in *relinquishing* its known world and *receiving* a new world given by God. More recently, Lee Beach [*The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2015), p. 25] has articulated the manner in which the motif of exile and the various biblical responses to exile infuse the church with "new creative energy that rises to meet the challenges of new cultural circumstances." Speaking personally from his Canadian context yet addressing the broader context of the West, Beach's explication of exilic narratives and practices emerges from his conviction that "a robust biblical and practical theology rooted in both the Old Testament and New Testament visions of exile can inform the contemporary church's self-understanding and mission" (p. 25). Smith-Christopher (2002, p. 6) has summarized well the significance of exile as a biblical-theological category: "...an 'exilic theology' promises to be the most provocative, creative, and helpful set of ideas that modern Christians can derive from the ancient Hebrews' religious reflections on their experience." For a much earlier theological interpretation of exile, see Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

portrays engagement by the exilic community and the manner in which they might speak into the life of the North American church today. These areas include lamentation, imagination, and confession.

Engagement in Exilic Lamentation

In their exilic experience, the people of God witnessed the total collapse of their intricately-constructed web of ideology, politic, and economy. The dismantling of the community's familiar world and the fear of an uncharted future engendered authentic expressions of grief, despair and disillusionment through songs of lamentation.

In order to hear and receive the laments of our exiled ancestors appropriately, one must recognize that exile is no mere theoretical, faddish category with which a post-Christian culture might work. Nor is it merely the supplier of colorful literary metaphors for the powerful to weave into tapestries of empty promises and false hopes. Lee Beach has rightly reminded us that in employing the metaphor of exile, we "must do so cautiously and with deep respect for the seriousness of the term. Exile has been a terrifying experience for many, and glorifying the idea of being stripped of cultural power may seem romantic on the surface, when it does not actually infringe on personal rights, but it is far less appealing when it results in actual violence, forced removal and disenfranchisement."⁵

Exile was, exile is, indeed the catastrophic reality of a community whose past is now a dim memory, whose present is characterized by despair, and whose future has all but disappeared. To hear and receive the exilic laments of our ancestors is to participate in the life of a community whose song is one of despondency: "Our bones are dried up; our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."⁶ To hear and receive the laments of our exiled ancestors is to hang our harps on the willow trees in Babylon at least long enough that we refuse to move quickly toward a neo-triumphalism that says, "Only in a matter of time, life will return to normalcy. Power will be ours, and we will make the church great again."⁷ To hear and to receive the laments of our exiled ancestors is to refuse separating ourselves from the grieving community of God's people as if we are merely "objective" observers. Rather it is to participate pastorally in the grief, the suffering, the loss experienced by the community in exile. To hear and to receive the laments of our exiled ancestors is vulnerably to participate in the cries of dereliction: "Why?" "How long?" and "When?" Engagement in exilic lamentation allows the people of God to see and to name the destruction, fear, and despair of exile honestly and openly without concern for negative repercussions from any outside source. Exile does not call for cover up of the reality, degradation

⁵ Beach, p. 23. Citing the warning of Sze-kar Wan ["Does Diaspora Identity Imply Some Sort of Universality? An Asian American Reading of Galatians" in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. F. F. Segovia (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), p. 119], Beach (p. 23) comments that "when truly stripped of power, exiles experience a longing to regain power rather than to celebrate its loss."

⁶ Ezek 37:11.

⁷ See the empty promises of "quick returns" in the narrative of Jeremiah's confrontation with Hananiah in Jer 28 as well as Jeremiah's instruction concerning the empty promises of false prophets in his letter to the exiles in Jer 29:1-23.

of those who struggle with paralysis, or shallow and empty prompts to move on. Exiles engage in lamentation with sincerity and honesty. Walter Brueggemann has rightly commented:

...if the city is dying, if the old order is failing, if the poet has diagnosed rightly, then the grief is urgent. It is a personal grief. It is a quite public grief. It is facing our true situation.... In God's attentive pain, healing happens. Newness comes. Possibilities are presented. But it all depends on being present with God in the hurt, which is incurable until God's hint of healing is offered.⁸

Engagement in Exilic Imagination

While the biblical narrative invites engagement in sincere exilic lamentation, it affirms that out of the ashes of destruction and despair, new life emerges. Exilic lamentation makes room for exilic imagination. This imagination dares to ask, "How might the people of the LORD live in a rearranged and strange world, and how might they embody their unique identity in that world?"

The grief of exile did not suppress the reflective imagination of our biblical ancestors. The community moved beyond denial, fear, and anger, and envisioned what life might look like within the new context in which their identity would be fleshed out. In light of the reality of exile, a creative struggle emerged—a struggle to reimagine their formative communal narratives and practices, to reimagine their communal calling, and to reimagine the nature of divine presence.⁹

Reimagining Formative Communal Narratives and Practices

In exile, the people of God revisited and reimagined their formative communal narratives and practices. While we might rightly understand the exile of the North American church to be a *loss* of our formative narrative, the exilic period challenges us to think in other ways. The half century of Babylonian exile and the period that followed was less about the *loss* of a formative narrative and more about the *recovery and reimagining* of the narrative that had been lost prior to exile. The exilic period is likely one of the most reflective, literarily creative periods in the life of our biblical ancestors. Much of our Old Testament scripture was compiled, edited, or written in the season of exile and the period immediately following.¹⁰

⁸ Brueggemann, 1986, pp. 46-47.

⁹ In light of recent trauma studies, David Carr has reminded us that "the Bible's distinctive themes and emphases can be traced back to century after century of crisis.... After centuries of crisis, ancient Israel had transformed its scriptures so they focused instead on landless ancestors and life in the wilderness" [David Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 4]. Describing both Jewish and Christian scriptures as "written in part as a response to communal suffering," Carr (p. 3) observes that suffering is presented as "a part of a broader story of redemption. In complicated ways, each tradition depicts catastrophe as a path forward."

¹⁰ Certainly while scholars are not in complete agreement regarding which literary works emerge from the exilic and early post-exilic periods, likely possibilities include the editorial

As the North American church engages with the biblical metaphor of exile, we at least must ask what our exilic ancestors must have asked, “Could it be that the narratives that began to define and shape us overtime prior to exile were actually not our foundational narratives? Is it possible that our faith narrative was coopted by the powers while we were still in our homeland? Were we perhaps duped by the powers of our own kingdom and subsequently sold our communal soul for narratives that were more appealing and triumphalist, narratives that would work better in a settled context, narratives that would teach us how to construct our own monarchy and how to preserve and secure our own lives? What if somewhere along the way we traded in our defining narrative of barren matriarchs and landless patriarchs, defenseless slaves and homeless orphans for the alluring promise of fertility and power, kings and alliances, idols and temples? What if we did not *lose* our narrative in exile but *traded it in* long before exile? And what if the false narratives that we began to view as truthful actually are responsible for bringing us to Babylon?” If these questions are valid, then we also should ask, “Could exile of God’s people actually be the gracious location within which we might be stripped of the dazzling, captivating narrative that the fertility cults, the powers, and the empire handed us? What if exile invites us not only to rediscover the narrative that was lost or taken or traded in along the way but to reimagine that narrative in such a way that it would speak identity, life and promise into our present exilic reality?”

For our ancestors and perhaps for us, exile becomes the occasion to reclaim and re-tradition formational narratives of divine promise, deliverance, covenant making and covenant breaking along with prophetic admonitions and warnings.¹¹ From the perspective of exilic faith, the formational narratives of God’s people can end outside the land of promise and appropriately shape our communal identity. Joseph’s mummified corpse can make its home *outside* of the land of promise and in Egypt as his bones wait to be carried up.¹² The lawgiver and prophet Moses can ascend Mount Nebo and die on the *other side* of the Jordan without ever setting foot in the land of promise.¹³ From the exilic perspective, it is appropriate for one generation to pronounce blessing upon the subsequent generation, empowering that generation to take the next step toward the land of promise. With exilic imagination, the community is able to compose a narrative or at least update an old one of God’s promise fulfilled *in* the land only to conclude in exile *outside* of the land.¹⁴ In all of these grand narratives, exilic imagination articulates a faith that can appropriately conclude with an ellipsis-like ending...*outside* the land of promise.

refashioning of the grand narratives of the Former Prophets (Joshua-2 Kings) and the Priestly Torah (Genesis-Numbers) as well as the Mosaic sermon and law in Deuteronomy, compilation of the pre-exilic and exilic oracles of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, exilic re-traditioning of the message of Isaiah of Jerusalem as it now spoke into the exilic situation (cc. 40-55), and the masterful arrangement of the scroll of Lamentations,

¹¹ Indeed, the Ur of the Chaldeans from which father Abraham and mother Sarah migrated is the very land in which many of the exiled now found themselves. David Carr (p. 97) has described the Abraham narrative as articulated by exilic writers as “an indirect picture of themselves... a proto-exile whose story mirrors the hopes and fears of the Judean exiles.”

¹² Gen 50:24-26. Thus the first scroll of the Torah concludes.

¹³ Deut 34:1-8. Thus the Torah concludes.

¹⁴ 2 Kgs 25:27-30. Thus the Former Prophets (Deuteronomistic History) concludes.

Embedded within the formational narratives of both Torah and Prophets are practices that not only memorialize the past but that shape the unique identity of God's people. The embodiment of the narrative cannot be divorced from the practices that will habituate the people into a community set apart by their unique God: Sabbath keeping,¹⁵ calendar,¹⁶ formative ritual and liturgy, social practices, dietary habits, circumcision, and intergenerational instruction.

Reimagining a Divinely-Called Community

Exilic imagination viewed *diasporic* identity not as something to be mourned as a loss but to be celebrated as divine calling. Within the broad context of all creation, narratives audaciously imagined barren and landless sojourners to be life-giving blessing to the nations among whom God's people were scattered. The narrative of covenant making at Sinai dared to imagine that this covenant community was set apart¹⁷ as a holy nation of life-giving priests for the sake of the world because in the words of Yahweh "the whole earth is mine."¹⁸

Jeremiah's admonition to the exiles reveals this call, one might even say *mission*, of the exiled community in Babylon to be a priestly blessing: pursue *shalom* for the city in which you live and pray to the LORD for it.¹⁹ Likewise exilic Isaiah reimagines the priestly task of life-giving blessing through the metaphor of light: "I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."²⁰ Indeed this reimagined calling of a dispersed and even marginalized people in exile was never a call to speak curse into darkness but to bear blessing, *shalom*, and light among the communities in which they found themselves.²¹

¹⁵ I refer here not only to the Sabbath day, rooted in both the narrative of creation (Exod 20:8-11) and the narrative of deliverance from Egypt (Deut 5:12-15) but also to the Sabbath year (Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7;) and at least the hope for a Jubilee (Lev 25:8-17).

¹⁶ I particularly have in mind the feasts of Passover/Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Tabernacles. Although the collection of the Festival Scrolls (*Megillot*) was a development subsequent to exile, each scroll accompanies a particular festival, thus Passover (Song of Songs), Purim (Ruth), 9th of Av (Lamentations), Tabernacles (Ecclesiastes), and Weeks (Ruth).

¹⁷ Thus "holy nation." The nature of faithful distinctiveness is especially remembered and expressed in the later legendary accounts of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as well as Daniel who remained faithful to their unique identity and practices in spite of violent threats. While these accounts particularly shaped a community facing Greek persecution, they are appropriately set in Babylonian exile. See Lee Beach's presentation of three narratives subsequent to exile: Daniel, Jonah, and Esther. Describing these narratives as "diasporic advice tales," Beach observes that "these stories creatively expressed hope in a practical way as their characters depicted faithful exilic living against the challenges of living on the margins of culture" (p. 64).

¹⁸ Exod 19:3-6.

¹⁹ Jer 29:7

²⁰ Isa 49:6; see also 42:6.

²¹ One is reminded of the words of the English Wesleyan minister William Lonsdale Watkinson: "Denunciatory rhetoric is so much easier and cheaper than good works, and proves a popular temptation. Yet is it far better to light the candle than to curse the darkness" (*The Supreme Conquest, and other sermons preached in America*, 1907).

Reimagining Divine Presence

With an exilic imagination, the people of God affirmed that their identity was not tied to a plot of land, a temple, or borders of a nation-state. Their identity was tied to a unique God, Yahweh, whose divine presence would not be domesticated by political or religious leaders, confined to a holy mountain (whether Sinai or Zion), or trapped in the human constructions of temples and idols. Exilic imagination boldly affirmed that divine presence was at home in the most alien and even threatening worlds. Yahweh's glory sojourned with the people to Babylon just as it tabernacled with their ancestors in the wilderness. One can only imagine how the retelling of God's response to King David's desire to build a temple would have shaped the imagination of divine presence in the exilic community as God declares:

I have not lived in a house from the day I brought the people up from Egypt to this day; I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved among the people of Israel, did I ever say, 'Why have you not built me a house?'²²

Exilic imagination dared to believe that Yahweh is the God who is freely on the move with his people whether through the wilderness or in the ghettos of Babylon or in the ashes of Jerusalem.

Engagement in Exilic Confession and a Hope-Filled Future

As the North American church employs the biblical metaphor of exile, a chief conviction within the Old Testament narrative cannot be ignored. It may be that in our desire to live faithfully in exile as a holy, missional, hope-filled people, we become blinded to what is perhaps the dominant theological question raised by our biblical ancestors regarding exile: Why are we here? Does our life together *prior to* exile tell us anything about living both in and beyond exile?

The prophetic/deuteronomistic tradition is particularly convinced that the exilic experience of God's people was not *merely* a socio-political, ideological, or cultural shift that displaced the people of God from their previously-held positions of power, privilege and prestige. Neither does this literary-theological trajectory interpret the exiled community as innocent victims of a changing world. Rather it understands the exiled people of God as victims of their own making; it interprets exile as the judgment or more precisely the visitation (*paqad*) of Yahweh upon the

²² See the account in 2 Samuel 7:1-7.

unfaithful covenant community.²³ In exile, the prophetic warnings of divine visitation, i.e., the Day of the LORD, have come full circle upon the people of God.²⁴

In a proleptic manner, Moses' final sermon in Deuteronomy anticipates the people's perennial struggle with covenant infidelity and its end in exile. In response to the question regarding why the people of Yahweh have undergone exilic devastation, Moses responds:

“It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt. They turned and served other gods, worshiping them, gods whom they had not known...”²⁵

The narrative of God's people that follows (Joshua-2 Kings) traces the habitual infidelity of the people of the LORD beginning with the so called cycle of retribution in which the unfaithful people of God are handed over to the surrounding nations.²⁶ The story of the covenant people continues with the request for a king and the rise of a dynasty, the worship of other gods and alliances with surrounding nations, and finally the fall of both Israel and Judah. This narrative interprets exile as Yahweh's judgment “because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God” by worshipping other gods and “walking in the customs of the nations.”²⁷

Not surprisingly, the exilic prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel follow a similar line of thought. Both were keenly aware that the people of God were not simply innocent victims of shifts in political climate or changes in cultural norms. They were convinced that the exilic realities were directly related to the covenant community's construction of political, economic, and ideological props to hold the kingdom together. As their reason for existence became

²³ Much more could be said regarding the term that is often translated as *punishment (paqad)* yet more precisely means *visitation*. Ultimately ancient Israel's “dynamic understanding of sin and its effects” is expressed through the term *paqad* [see Terence E. Fretheim, “The Authority of the Bible, the Flood Story, and Problematic Images of God,” *Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Alan H. Cadwallader (Adelaide: ATF Ltd., 2011, p. 42); see also Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 77ff. and chapter six in Fretheim's *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); regarding von Rad's “synthetic view of life” in relationship to the lack of specific language of punishment in the Old Testament, see Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, v. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 265, 385].

²⁴ See particularly the manner in which the eighth-century B.C. prophet Amos re-traditions Israel's nationalistic concept of the Day of the LORD and brings it full circle back upon the people of God in the northern kingdom. After the series of curses against neighboring nations, the prophet reaches his conclusion declaring, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish (*paqad*, visit; see discussion above) you for all your iniquities” (3:2).

²⁵ See Deut 29:22ff.

²⁶ e.g., see Judg 2:11-19 and the various narratives that follow in the book of Judges.

²⁷ 2 Kgs 17:7-8; see also 2 Kgs 24:1-4 in which Jerusalem's destruction is described as being “according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by his servants the prophets” yet is particularly tied to the sins and violent bloodshed committed by King Manasseh.

survival, sustainability, and growth, the people of God had repeatedly turned to the worship of the fertility gods, idol making, and alliances with surrounding nations.²⁸

The prophets that preceded Jeremiah and Ezekiel are portrayed as also keenly aware of the direct correlation between the infidelity of the people of God and the imminent reality of exile.²⁹ In a most poignant manner, Hosea depicts the nature of exile as divine judgment using metaphors of marriage and parenthood.³⁰ In the covenant lawsuit in c. 2, the prophet warns the people that unless they remove the very symbols of harlotry, they will be stripped naked, exposed, and made into a wilderness.³¹ The divine accusation that follows depicts the dilemma of God's people as they stubbornly announce, "I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink."³² The assumption of the people of the LORD is that their sources for nourishment, growth, and survival are possessions that they themselves acquire (i.e., my bread, my water, my wool, etc.). These possessions are perceived to be the reward or payment from lovers for services rendered.³³ The people of God have forgotten

²⁸ Certainly one might say that Israel and Judah's worship was less about the fertility gods worshipped and more about attaining fertility; likewise their allegiance was less to the nations with whom alliances were made and more to the security, prosperity, and survival attained through those alliances.

²⁹ For the prophet Jeremiah, as the temple of the LORD morphed into an invincible hideout for oppressors of foreigners, the fatherless, and widows, when it had become the indestructible sanctuary for persons who engaged in acts of violence against other human beings, when it had become the safe place for consumers consumed by consumption (stealing, murder, adultery), and when it had become a refuge for those who followed after the gods of popular culture, Yahweh announces: "I will do to the house that is called by my name, (the house) in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight..." (Jer 7:14). In Jeremiah's temple sermon (7:1-15), the fall of the northern kingdom and its shrine at Shiloh because of "the wickedness of my people Israel" (v. 12) becomes the prototype of what may/will occur in Judah as the people follow the way of their northern kinfolk. From Ezekiel's priestly perspective of the departure of the divine glory (10:18-20), how could the divine otherness of God remain in the temple when its elders burn incense to idols, when its women wail over the death of the popular fertility deity, when the assembly of men turn their backs to Yahweh's temple and turn their faces to the east in homage of the imperial gods? The house of God had indeed become the house of the empire and the sanctuary of the emperor. In the shadow of Amos, one might say that the house of God in Jerusalem has become precisely what Bethel had become in the northern kingdom: the *house of God* (*bayit 'el*) became the *house of the kingdom* and the *sanctuary of the king*. The prophet Amos articulated the same outcome as Jeremiah and Ezekiel: "Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land" (7:17). As the prophet Micah articulates thought similar to Jeremiah regarding the false sense of security by leaders (rulers, priests, prophets) who carry out unjust and violent acts, the downfall of Jerusalem is also certain.

³⁰ See cc. 1-3 and c. 11.

³¹ Hos 2:3.

³² Hos 2:5.

³³ See Hos 2:12 in which the people confess, "These are my pay which my lovers have given me."

or lack knowledge altogether that they are recipients of gift from their gracious benefactor, Yahweh. They are *not* recipients of a stipend for services provided.³⁴ Grieving over his people who “did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil,” Yahweh announces, “I will take back my grain...my wine...my wool...my flax.”³⁵

What then is Hosea’s resolution? The prophet announces that Yahweh will *galah* (*strip bare*; NRSV *uncover*) his people bare in the sight of their lovers with no one to deliver them or provide for them.³⁶ Emptied of all that they had understood their lovers, their pseudo-religious systems and political alliances, to have given them as payment for services rendered, God’s people stand stripped bare, uncovered, exposed—they are *galah*. Lest we miss it, *galah* is also employed in Hebrew scripture for *exile*. For Hosea and for subsequent generations, exile is not merely social dislocation or cultural shift. It is the stripping bare of gifts that became idols: temple, king, land. Naked and exposed, the people of God stand. Stripped of fertility gods that promised growth in drought, fertility in barrenness, survival in the midst of threat, naked and bare they stand. Stripped of alliances with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and all subsequent empires that have promised assistance, protection, even legislation on behalf of the people of God, naked and bare they stand. Stripped of idols in which they had encapsulated the God they worshipped, stripped of all political, economic, and ideological machinery that had come to define Yahweh,³⁷ naked and bare they stand.

Indeed while the prophet Hosea imagines new life beyond *galah*,³⁸ the hope of new life cannot be separated from the “stripping bare” and the alluring into the wilderness any more than resurrection can be separated from crucifixion. Within the biblical narrative, Yahweh’s visitation (*paqad*) is not viewed as a final act of divine frustration, anger and destruction upon God’s people. Exile, the stripping bare, becomes the redemptive and transformative action of God in the life of God’s people.

As the biblical narrative speaks to the North American church today, we should remain vigilant regarding the Old Testament’s central conviction of exile: exile is integrally related to the covenant infidelity of God’s people. In exile, the misplaced trust of God’s people has come

³⁴Hosea’s prophetic announcement in 2:13 articulates the issue of forgetfulness/lack of knowledge well: “They went after other lovers, and they forgot me.” Following the declaration in 4:1b that “there is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land,” Hosea specifically points to the failure of the priests (see 4:4, 6a).

³⁵ Hos 2:8-9.

³⁶ Hos 2:10

³⁷ Even to the point that the people of God had apparently identified Yahweh as *ba’al*, see Hos 2:16.

³⁸ According to Hosea, Yahweh himself will allure his people back into the wilderness; he will speak to their heart and transform the Valley of Achor (suffering) into a door of hope (vv. 14-15). That door of hope anticipates a covenant with all creation in which violence and warfare are abolished and in which he will take his people as a bride in a marriage of righteousness, justice, fidelity, mercy, and faithfulness.

full circle upon them.³⁹ As the metaphor of exile speaks into the life and identity of the North American church, the conviction of exile as a *stripping bare* functions both to remind the church of what it means to hope and to call the church to confession and repentance.

On the one hand, this exilic conviction serves as a reminder and perhaps corrective regarding hope of “going home” or returning from exile. As exile is interpreted to be a stripping bare of the props upon which the people of God had built their existence and identity, the hope of tomorrow cannot be a tomorrow in which God’s people simply return to the privileged, prestigious, and powerful place they once knew. The hope of tomorrow cannot be a tomorrow in which God’s people simply reconstruct a temple that looks like one more outpost of the empire. Nor can it be a tomorrow that urges us to shape new idols that function more efficiently in a changed cultural setting. Nor can it be a tomorrow that encourages us to create new fertility gods that will instruct us in how to increase the church’s fertility in a post-Christian context. Nor can this hope be for a tomorrow that will prompt us once again to align ourselves with parties and kingdoms that promise protection and even legislation of our agendas.

If hope beyond exile is no more than a return to the “glory days” of the way things were, we have not comprehended the *why* of exile. And if we do not comprehend the *why* of exile, we will never be able to imagine how to live in exile now or how to imagine a hope-filled future in the kingdom of our Messiah. Servitude to new temples, new kings, new idols, new gods, and new empires simply leads us down the road to the next Hasmonean dynasty and will most certainly lead us once again to anticipate the coronation of a triumphalist, militant Messiah. To travel that road is to have misunderstood biblical exile entirely.

It this hope-filled future in and beyond exile is something other than a triumphalist return to the way things used to be, then what is it? We begin to catch glimpses of that future in the language of the exilic prophets. The prophet Jeremiah addresses the community once called adulterers as virgins.⁴⁰ Adulterers become virgins? How can that be? The prophet Ezekiel envisions lifeless dry bones as resurrected fleshy bodies.⁴¹ The dead come to life? How can that be? The exilic voice of Isaiah invites the barren to burst into song as their descendants will become more numerous than the most fertile.⁴² The barren multiply and fill the earth? How can that be? This hope-filled future is anything but a return to “normalcy,” a return to the way things were. It is new creation, transformation from death to life, from curse to blessing, from violence to *shalom*. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel boldly dare to imagine that this hope-filled future extends to the very transformation of the stubborn, recalcitrant heart of God’s people so that indeed “I will be their God, and they will be my people.”⁴³ Once again the proleptic words of Moses in

³⁹The prophet Obadiah (v. 15) succinctly summarizes this prophetic/deuteronomic conviction of divine judgment: “For the day of Yahweh is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.”

⁴⁰ Jer 31:3-4, 21.

⁴¹ Ezek 37:1-14.

⁴² Isa 54:1-2.

⁴³ Jer 31:33; see also Ezek 36:28. Deut 30:6 reflects thought similar to that of Jer 31 and Ezek 36.

Deuteronomy articulate this hope-filled, transformed future for a community that was incapable of fulfilling the *Shema*:

Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you.... Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live.

The poetic words of Walter Brueggemann thirty years ago this year vividly translates what this hope-filled future might look like for the North American church:

The poet in exile sings his people to homecoming. And that is a theme to which the exiled church in America is now summoned. The gospel is that we may go home. Home is not here in the consumer militarism of a dominant value system. Home also is not in heaven, as though we may escape. Home, rather is God's kingdom of love and justice and peace and freedom that waits for us. The news is we are invited home.... The whole church may yet sing: 'Precious Savior take my hand. Lead me home!'⁴⁴

Not only does the conviction of exile as *stripping bare* reframe the North American church's perception of what hope or "home" looks like. It also calls the church to that which the first exiles were called: confession and repentance. As the canonical text of Hosea reaches its conclusion, the prophet extends an invitation to the people of God to return to Yahweh their God. His invitation is followed with words of confession and repentance to utter: "Take away all guilt; accept that which is good and we will offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; we will say no more, 'Our god' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy."⁴⁵

Perhaps the concluding statement of this prayer expresses precisely what the exilic experience was and is for the people of God: we have indeed been orphaned, abandoned by the political, economic, and ideological systems upon which we had built our ecclesial kingdom. And having seen the delusionary nature of the hills we climbed, the gods we worshipped, and the alliances we made, we come to our senses and recognize that the birthplace of our faith was the wilderness then...and now. In the wilderness of exile, we may return to the God who birthed us when we went down into the waters of the Red Sea and came up a delivered people, when we ate the heavenly bread and drank from the life-giving waters in the wilderness, and when he covenanted with us, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." Indeed, in the wilderness of exile, we may return to the God who called us and confess him as "My husband" and no longer "My ba'al."⁴⁶

In the midst of exile's perilous realities, exilic voices boldly engaged in lamentation, imagination, and confession. In subsequent seasons of displacement and marginalization, persecution and martyrdom, these exilic voices were emancipated from a peculiar moment in ancient Israel's history. The metaphor of exile itself became a living, dynamic organism, a lenses

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, 1986, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Hos 14:1-2.

⁴⁶ See Hos 2:16.

through which subsequent generations might understand and interpret their own unique exilic contexts. We see this reality first emerge in early Judaism and continue in the writings of the early followers of Jesus.

New Testament

Given the popularity of the theme of exile in contemporary North American Christianity it is surprising how infrequently the word appears in the New Testament. For example the literal NASB95 translation uses the word only once in the New Testament (Hebrews 11:13 . . . having confessed that they were strangers and exiles (*parepidēmoi*) on the earth.) The ESV uses the word 6 times in 6 verses (Acts 7:29 . . . Moses fled and became an exile (*paroikos*); Acts 7:43 quoting Amos 5:27 LXX, where God says, I will send you into exile (*metoikiō*) beyond Babylon; Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 1:1 . . . To those who elect exiles (*parepidēmoi*) of the Dispersion); 1 Peter 1:17 . . . conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile (*paroikia*); and 1 Peter 2:11 . . . I urge you are sojourners and exiles (*parepidēmoi*.) The NRSV uses the word only three times, in the three verses from 1 Peter noted above. The NIV uses the word 7 times in 6 verses (Matthew 1:11, 12, and 17 (2x) using (*metoikesia*) to refer to the historical event of the Babylonian exile, plus Acts 7:43, 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11). Matthew 1:11, 12, 17, and Acts 7:29 and 43 refer to the exile as an historical event. Hebrews 11:13 references Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah as Old Testament heroes of faith. Only in 1 Peter (1:1; 1:17; and 2:11) do we find the word exile functioning as a metaphor for the people of God living with loss of security and status.

This lack of emphasis on exile in the New Testament is strange if N.T. Wright and others are correct that Judaism in Jesus' time regarded themselves as still living in exile. N.T. Wright argues that the narrative of hope for "the Jew-in-the-village in the first half of the first century" include a strong link between the return from Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple with the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy.⁴⁷ As a result though Jews of the first century occupied the Holy Land and worshipped at the Temple in Jerusalem, they were "paradoxically . . . still in exile."⁴⁸ The reason for this continued state of exile is that they had "the wrong rulers: pagans on the one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or, half-way between, Herod and his family."⁴⁹ To put the matter more succinctly, the exile would not end until the Davidic Messiah had come, had established God's kingdom, and had signaled the return of YHWH's presence to the Temple and the Land.

As evidence that a significant segment of Judaism regarded themselves as still in exile in the two centuries leading up to the New Testament era Craig Evans cites a number of texts. These include Josephus' treatment of Theudas (*Antiquities* 20.5.1 §97-98) and of an Egyptian Jew (*Jewish Wars* 2.13.4-5 §258-263 and *Antiquities* 20.8.6 § 167-172); Sirach 36: 6, 13-16 and

⁴⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 204.

⁴⁸ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992), 243.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

48:10; Tobit 13:3 and 14:5; Baruch 2:7-10; 2 Maccabees 2:7, 18; and 2 Baruch 78:7. Common to these texts are either descriptions of Jews still suffering the punishment for their sins that began with the Babylonian exile and/or prayers for the final restoration of Israel.⁵⁰ Tobit 14:5 provides a clear example,

“But God will again have mercy on them, and God will bring them back into the land of Israel; and they will rebuild the temple of God, but not like the first one until the period when the times of fulfillment shall come. After this they all will return from their exile and will rebuild Jerusalem in splendor; and in it the temple of God will be rebuilt, just as the prophets of Israel have said concerning it.”⁵¹

Tobit 13:6 suggests that repentance is still needed before God restores his people from exile. Jubilees 23:18-31 indicates that God’s restoration will not take place until a new generation searches the law and the commandments and returns to the way of righteousness.

The Teaching and Ministry of Jesus

Six features of Jesus’ teaching and actions have suggested to some that Jesus thought of his ministry in terms of exile theology: 1) the appointing of twelve apostles, 2) the request for a sign from heaven, 3) the citation of Isaiah 56:7 at the cleansing of the temple, 4) the allusion to Zechariah 2:6 in Mark 13:27, 5) judgment statement threatening exile, and 6) the use of the word exile in Matthew’s genealogy (suggesting the exile did not come to an end until Jesus appeared).⁵² However, the appointing of the twelve and the sign from heaven are signs of the restoration of Israel, not of continuing exile. Likewise, Jesus’ use of Isaiah 56:7 to explain his cleansing of the temple points to the initiation of eschatological promise of making the temple a house of prayer for all the nations. In similar fashion the allusion to Zechariah 2:6 suggests that the gathering of the exiles of Israel has begun with Jesus’ ministry. Though the elements of Jesus’ teachings and actions mentioned above reflect the Jewish perspective that the exile continued throughout the period of Second Temple Judaism, those teachings and actions mark the end of exile rather than an embracing of exile theology as language to describe Jesus’ ministry or the on-going experience of Jesus’ followers.

Scot McKnight bluntly places Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom of God over against the idea of exile as part of Jesus’ message, “Kingdom language is ‘end of exile’ language.”⁵³ This case has been most forcefully argued by Wright, especially in *Jesus and the Victory of God*. In both Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15 the announcement of the kingdom of God is linked to a call to repentance. Repentance was widely understood within Judaism as one, and perhaps the primary,

⁵⁰ Craig A. Evans, “Aspects of Exile and Restoration in the Proclamation of Jesus and the Gospels,” in James M. Scott. *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*. Leiden: Brill, 1997, 300-314.

⁵¹ Tobit 14:5. All biblical citations (including the Apocrypha) are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

⁵² Evans, 316-326.

⁵³ Scot McKnight. *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999, 83, n. 51.

condition for the restoration of Israel and thus the end of exile.⁵⁴ Thus, in the context of Jesus' ministry, his announcement of the kingdom and call for repentance is also a declaration of the end of exile.

Forgiveness also played a significant role in the message of Jesus⁵⁵ and has been identified as “the one great gift” of the age of the Messiah.⁵⁶ Recent scholarship has recognized a close connection between Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and the end of the exile.⁵⁷ Though the implications of this insight for traditional Christian emphasis on individual forgiveness is debated it is clear when Jesus offered forgiveness of sins he was offering return from exile, an invitation to the renewed covenant, and the kingdom of God.⁵⁸ Wright argues, “There is, in fact, no tension, no play-off, between the personal and the corporate at this point.”⁵⁹ He sees Jesus' announcements of forgiveness to the paralyzed man and the woman who anointed him as offering them participation in the kingdom of God the coming of which marks the end of Israel's exile and the end of those persons' personal exile.

Other elements of Jesus' teaching and ministry when understood in their Jewish context indicate that Jesus saw himself as God's agent bringing about the end of the exile. The parable of the Prodigal Son can be understood as proclaiming the end of the exile through the gracious acceptance of God the father.⁶⁰ Jesus' practice of eating with “tax-collectors and sinners” was understood in Palestinian culture as an expression of solidarity with and acceptance of such sinners, welcoming them into the kingdom and announcing the end of the(ir) exile.⁶¹ Matthew 11:2-6 and Luke 7:18-23 indicate that Jesus saw his miracles of healing and demon exorcism as signs of the kingdom and evidence that he was the Messiah. As kingdom signs the miracles were also end of exile signs.⁶² In fact, Wright concludes,

Healing, forgiveness, renewal, the twelve, the new family and its new defining characteristics, open commensality, the promise of blessing for the Gentiles, feasts replacing fasts, the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple: all declared, in the powerful language of symbol, that Israel's exile was over, that Jesus was himself in

⁵⁴ E.P. Sanders. *Jesus and Judaism*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985, 106-108.

⁵⁵ Leonhard Goppelt. *Theology of the New Testament*. Vol. 1. Trans. John E. Alsup. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981, 131-138.

⁵⁶ Joachim Jeremias. *The Lord's Prayer*. Facet Books, Biblical Series – 8, trans. John Reumann. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964, 27.

⁵⁷ McKnight, 224-227.

⁵⁸ Wright, *JVG*, 272. Wright cites Jeremiah 31:31-34, 33:4-11; Ezekiel 36:24-6, 33; 37:21-23; Isaiah 40:1-2; 42:25-44:3; 52:1, 3, 9; 53:5-6, 11-12; 54:1, 3, 8; 55:7, 12; Daniel 9:16-19; Ezra 9:6-15; Nehemiah 9:6-37; Baruch 1:15-3:8; 1QS 11:11-14; and the 6th of the 18 Benedictions to show that the Judaism of Jesus' time would not have understood forgiveness as only a private matter.

⁵⁹ Wright, *JVG*, 272-273.

⁶⁰ Wright, *JVG*, 126-129.

⁶¹ Goppelt, 131, and Wright, *JVG*, 274.

⁶² Wright, *JVG*, 242-243, 428-430.

some way responsible for this new state of affairs, and that all that the Temple had stood for was now available through Jesus and his movement.⁶³

This suggests one of the perils of the contemporary interest in the exile metaphor lies in locating ourselves in a place that Jesus came to end. To the degree the church embraces the metaphor of exile to explain our present situation, to that degree we abandon the “already” character of the kingdom in favor of the “not yet.” If we abandon the notion of realized or even inaugurated eschatology in favor of a purely futuristic eschatology we leave the church with reduced defenses to the problems of both Gnosticism and Dispensationalism.

Philippians

A related challenge to using the exile metaphor for the church is that exile, especially as it is used in the North American church today, focuses on a sense of loss. The New Testament in general and certainly Paul in particular, do not regard what is lost for the sake of participating in Christ as worthy of lament.

“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”⁶⁴

A chapter and a half earlier Paul told the Philippians, “This is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.”⁶⁵ Between this two texts stand the great Christ Hymn which calls the church to set its mind in the pattern of Christ’s mindset,

“who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”⁶⁶

Philippians also twice addresses the question of the church’s true citizenship. Philippians 1:27 commands the church at Philippi to live their “life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The imperative is *πολιτεύεσθε* (*politeusthe*) which means “to be a citizen, to administer a corporate body, to conduct’s one’s life” (BDAG). Given the fact that Philippi was a Roman colony with many Roman citizens it is likely Paul chose the word

⁶³ Wright, *JVG*, 436.

⁶⁴ Philippians 3:7-8.

⁶⁵ Philippians 1:28d-29.

⁶⁶ Philippians 2:6-8.

instead of more typical word, “walk” (περιπατέω *peripateō*), to call the church to kingdom citizenship rather than Roman citizenship.⁶⁷

In Philippians 3:20 Paul declares, “Our citizenship is in heaven.” The word translated “citizenship” by most modern versions is πολιτεύμα (*politeuma*) most commonly referred to a commonwealth or a state though it was also used of a colony of foreigners.⁶⁸ Heaven is the commonwealth to which believers belong. As Fleming puts it, “As citizens of heaven, [Paul’s readers’] values will be determined, not by any earthly loyalty, but by the ‘counter-empire’ of Christ.”⁶⁹ The followers of Christ eagerly await a Savior from this commonwealth of heaven. This is not the language of loss as the metaphor of exile implies, but an expression of a loyalty that surpasses earthly privilege and gain.

These passages draw our attention to the recent development of Empire Criticism in New Testament studies. At its most basic level Empire Criticism calls for an awareness of how certain New Testament words and concepts echo significant words and concepts operative in Rome’s description of the Empire. Terms such as Savior, Lord, gospel, and peace are central to New Testament theology, but they also were in common usage to describe the Emperor, the good news of the birth of Augustus Caesar, and the acclaimed *pax romana*. At the least Empire Criticism calls on readers of the New Testament to recognize the echo of these and similar terms so that first century Christians would understand themselves as members of an alternative empire, a colony of heaven. In its most forceful expressions Empire Criticism argues that New Testament writers were intentionally deconstructing the Roman meaning of these terms and asserting the superiority or the victory of the commonwealth of heaven over Rome.⁷⁰

Whether one is persuaded by the most forceful claims of Empire Criticism or believes only that the language of the New Testament provides interesting parallels to the claims of the Roman Empire, the New Testament use of such imperial language does not suggest a posture of lament and loss. Perhaps these terms represent a dynamic reimagining of Rome’s narrative of the empire in the confidence that God has become all in all through the person and work of Jesus Christ⁷¹ and that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”⁷²

Babylon

⁶⁷ Dean Fleming. *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. New Beacon Bible Commentary. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2009, 85.

⁶⁸ BDAG and Fleming, 199-200.

⁶⁹ Fleming, 200.

⁷⁰ Major players in Empire Criticism include Warren Carter, Richard Horsley, and N.T. Wright. An irenic review and evaluation of Empire Criticism can be found in Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds. *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013.

⁷¹ 1 Corinthians 15:28.

⁷² Philippians 2:10-11.

A fascinating intersection of the language of exile and empire appears in the New Testament use of the word Babylon. The word appears in a [presumably] neutral sense four times in Matthew 1:11, 12, and 17 (2x) referring to the exile or deportation to Babylon. It appears in Acts 7:43 quoting Amos 5:27 but replacing Damascus (in both the Hebrew and LXX texts) with Babylon. This appears to represent Luke (Stephen) adapting the Amos prophesy of exile to the historical reality of that exile in Babylon.⁷³ The first (in canonical order) non-historical use of Babylon in the New Testament is 1 Peter 5:13, “Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings.” There is wide agreement that Babylon here is a cipher for Rome.⁷⁴

Revelation speaks six times of Babylon: Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21. In every case the word appears as a symbolic name for Rome and usually mocks Rome’s pretension of power and glory. Revelation 14:8 declares, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” The same words appear in Revelation 18:2. Revelation 18:10 laments the fall of Babylon, “Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come.” Revelation 16:19 declares, “God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath.” Revelation 17:5 says of the city, “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations.” This is not the language of loss. Whether it is the wishful thinking of embittered subjects of the Roman Empire or the confident assertion of ultimate victory of Christ can be debated, but Revelation does not picture the church as being in exile lamenting the loss of power and status. Rather, it pictures the Church enjoying ultimate victory over the Empire.

1 Peter

The only positive use of exile language appears in 1 Peter. 1 Peter 1:1 addresses the letter to the exiles of the Dispersion. “Exiles” translates *παρεπίδημος* (*parepidēmos*), a stranger, resident alien, a person staying for a while in a foreign place (BDAG). 1 Peter 1:17 calls on the readers to live in “reverent fear during the time of [their] exile, *παροιμία* (*paroikia*). This word speaks of a state of being in a strange locality without citizenship, living in a foreign land. 1 Peter 2:11 then appeals to the readers as aliens (*πάροικος*, *paroikos*) and exiles (*παρεπίδημος*, *parepidēmos*). Though there is a rich tradition of understanding the use of exile language in 1 Peter as spiritual⁷⁵, John Elliott argues that these references are best understood as pointing to

⁷³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer. *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 31. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998, 381-382.

⁷⁴ See John H. Elliott. *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 37B. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000, 882-887 and J. Ramsey Michaels. *1 Peter*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 49. Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1988, 311, though Michaels doubts that the “sinister associations” of Babylon found Revelation were already present in 1 Peter.

⁷⁵ Leonhard Goppelt. *A Commentary on 1 Peter*. Ferdinand Hahn, ed., John E. Alsup, trans. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, states “this foreignness is established by election,” 68. Daniel G. Power. *1 & 2 Peter/Jude*. New Beacon Bible Commentary. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2010, states “Some interpreters take **strangers** in a sociological sense . . . Most, however, take this figuratively. They were spiritual sojourners in the world.,” 42.

“the addressees’ actual social situation of ‘alien residence’ or ‘residing as aliens’ in a land and among people not their own.”⁷⁶ In either case exile language is clearly embraced to describe that group of first century Christians living in a world of some real or potential hostility.

Conclusions

What does the New Testament say about the peril and promise of exile? To the degree that the North American church today embraces the language of exile as a way of lamenting our loss of prestige, respect, and political power, we are out of sync with the New Testament church. We are also out of sync with major portions of the Christian church around the world today which have never experienced power, respect, and prestige in their culture.

If Judaism continued to regard itself as “paradoxically still in exile” because the Messiah had not come, the church today should give significant care to the Christological implications of framing its own existence in terms of exile. Jesus’ use of kingdom language pushes against exile language regardless of whether one regards him as Messiah.

On the other hand, certainly 1 Peter finds the language exile helpful in describing the Christian struggle to live as citizens of heaven. David Bartlett’s insightful comment about the addressees of 1 Peter, “They were not rescued *from* exile; they were rescued *into* exile,”⁷⁷ points toward a positive New Testament framing of exile language.

A positive framing of the exile language of 1 Peter in a way consistent with other New Testament writings is by a specific understanding of colony. 1 Peter may well of understood its resident alien readers as a colony of coming kingdom of God. They recognized that the world was not their home, but they were to speak the language and live, to the degree possible consistent with Christ, in the culture as an outpost of the coming kingdom.⁷⁸

The description of the church as a pilgrim people also picks up the positive sense of 1 Peter’s use of exile language. Though the actual word “pilgrim” does not appear in the major English translations of the New Testament, the concept has been increasingly used of the church since the publication of Ernst Käsemann’s *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*.⁷⁹ Methodist New Testament scholar, Robert Jewett draws upon

⁷⁶ Elliott, 369.

⁷⁷ David L. Bartlett. “The First Letter of Peter: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. XII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998, 238. The italics are Bartlett’s.

⁷⁸ The subtitle of the “Expanded 25th Anniversary Edition” of Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something Is Wrong*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989, is now *Life in the Christian Colony*.

⁷⁹ Ernst Käsemann. *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*. Trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984. The English translation is from the 2nd German edition, copyrighted in 1957.

Käsemann in his *Letters to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Jewett states,

“The pilgrim faith as described by Hebrews contains a radical reinterpretation of adversity and a dialogical concept of fulfillment. . . . Hebrews interprets adversity as an inevitable and unresolvable aspect of the created order as designed by God. Insecurity is built in, so to speak, as the ‘disciple’ intended by the ‘Father’ of all. . . . To yearn for a troublefree life is to betray the relationship with Christ whose word encounters one ‘today,’ offering fulfillment in a dialogical sense but not release from the conditions of finitude. . . . The Christ of Hebrews is daringly reinterpreted as the one who redeems his pilgrim community by sharing the condition of pilgrimage: insecurity, temptation, and death.”⁸⁰

Though the challenges facing the Church as we live as disciples of Christ are always of interest to us, they are always of penultimate significance. What matters most for us is whether we, the Church, are “looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Robert Jewett. *Letter to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1981, 12-13.

⁸¹ Hebrews 12:2.