

A RESPONSE TO GREEN AND HAHN,
“PERIL AND PROMISE OF EXILE”
Albert W. Hung

Timothy Green and Roger Hahn provide a timely and necessary corrective to the western Church’s growing usage of exilic language in regards to its place in an increasingly post-Christian world. Understandably, the stories of exile contained in Scripture resonate with modern evangelicals who are experiencing the slow “collapse of their intricately-constructed web of ideology, politic, and economy.” The authors remind us, however, that we live on the other side of the cross from our spiritual forefathers. Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom, his call for repentance, and his death and resurrection signal the end, not the onset, of exile. Though we are resident aliens in a fallen world, we no longer identify as wanderers, slaves, or orphans. In the same way that colorful maps in public spaces tell passersby, “You are here,” Green and Hahn help believers to properly locate themselves in the broader narrative of God’s ongoing story of redemption and renewal, that we may confidently engage our culture not as exiles, but as hope-filled citizens of the already-but-not-yet kingdom of God.

It’s abundantly clear that the cultural and political influence of western Christianity is on the wane. Of course, losing a bit of our privilege and power is hardly comparable to the experience of actual exile, with its attendant “violence, forced removal, and disenfranchisement.” Still, like the Israelites, we find ourselves in a world that feels increasingly foreign. “Fear of an uncharted future [has] engendered authentic expressions of grief, despair, and illusionment.” Yet it is precisely this sense of dislocation that allows us to enter more fully into the experiences of our exiled ancestors and rediscover the God who is “freely on the move with his people whether... in the ghettos of Babylon on in the ashes of Jerusalem,” or indeed, in a post-Christian America. As Green and Hahn astutely point out, “the birthplace of our faith was in the wilderness, then and now.” There are aspects of God and his kingdom that can only be understood from a position of weakness, from the viewpoint of an outsider, during seasons of pain and loss.

Green and Hahn argue that exilic periods challenge us to reimagine who we are and what we are called to do as the people of God. As a colony of the coming kingdom, how do we engage with those who are unfamiliar with our beliefs, language, and customs? What does it mean to be holy, set apart for God’s purposes, in our current context? To what degree have we lost our way (again)? Perhaps the loss of our position and power is in reality an act of severe mercy, a “stripping bare of gifts that became idols,” God’s way of leading us forward into a preferred future. Frankly speaking, what is so great about American evangelical Christianity that makes it worth saving? If we have been seduced and led astray by the lesser gods of wealth, power, and comfort, then we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by celebrating their demise. As Green and Hahn observe, “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.”

The American church has enjoyed an unusually long period of privilege, freedom, and cultural influence. The stripping away of that power is not something to be feared, but rather to be welcomed, if it results in a church that is more in tune with its identity and calling. To suggest that we are a people in exile would be at odds with the message and ministry of Jesus, who came

to welcome us into his Father's kingdom, not banish us from it. To be sure, we will experience tension as recent cultural shifts reawaken us to the reality that this world is not our home. But we are not exiles. Rather, we are, and have always been, covert agents living in a foreign land: ambassadors, diplomats, and peacemakers of another kingdom who convey glad tidings: "The time has come! The kingdom of God is at hand! Repent, and believe the good news!"