

LIVING IN TENSION: EXILIC IDENTITY IN JEREMIAH 29 AND 1 PETER

Samuel Hildebrandt, Lecturer, NTC Manchester

Abstract

The concept of “exile” occupies a central place in the larger biblical narrative and yet it receives but little explicit mention in the OT and even less in the NT. The word–cluster of “dispersion” and “sojourning” in 1 Peter 1.1, 17 and 2.11 suffices in this scenario to elevate 1 Peter 1-2 to the most significant NT “exile–text.” Inspired by its many connections with the OT, I am reading 1 Peter in conversation with Jeremiah 29, one of the most explicit OT–perspective on “living as exiles.” I will demonstrate that Jeremiah’s letter to the dispersed in Babylon shares many aspects with Peter’s letter which help to illuminate the discipleship of Christian “exiles” today. My study reflects on questions concerning identity, pastoral care, and human responses to God’s “good plans” in exile.

Introduction

The author of 1 Peter addresses his audience with reference to the Old Testament in a way that exceeds most of the other NT–writers.¹ Inasmuch as the direct quotations from Isaiah (1:24–25; 2:6, 8), the Psalms (2:7; 3:10–12), and Proverbs (4:18) establish the theme of divine judgment, other cross–canonical connections relate to Christian calling and identity. Most significant in this respect is the *imitatio dei* of Lev 11 (“You shall be holy, for I am holy;” 1:16),² the appellations of Mt. Sinai and Hosea’s restoration oracles (2:9–10), and the privilege of a revelation to which neither the Hebrew prophets nor the angels had access (1:10–12).

What is striking in view of these explicit links is the absence of an OT–quotation regarding “exile.” This notion, I will argue, plays a crucial role especially in the opening two chapters and is vital for addressing the letter’s question of how God’s holy people should live in a hostile and tempting world. From a Jewish perspective, this question is as old as the patriarchs’ sojourning and Solomon’s foreign policies,³ yet it reached a new level of urgency with the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. This event has established “exile” as a central element across the Hebrew Scriptures,⁴ the literature of the Second–Temple Period, and the New Testament. Since it has become a central category in NT–studies,⁵ it may come as a surprise that explicit references are

¹ Compiling a list of nine quotations and twenty allusions, Peter H. Davids concludes that “1 Peter contains about the same number of OT references per unit of text as does Hebrews. Only Revelation contains more.” *The First Epistle of Peter* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 24. See, e.g., Sue Woan, “The Psalms in 1 Peter,” in *The Psalms in the New Testament* (eds., Steve Moyise, and Maarten J. J. Menken; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 213–30; P. E. Detering, “Exodus Motifs in First Peter,” *Concordia Journal* 7 (1981): 58–65; W. E. Glenny, “The Hermeneutics of the Use of the Old Testament in 1 Peter” (DTh. diss. Dallas Theological Seminary, 1987).

² All Scripture references are taken from the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway).

³ “The whole national thinking and philosophy displays for us ‘a nation on the move;’” M. Chin, “A Heavenly Home for the Homeless: Aliens and Strangers in 1 Peter,” *TynBul* 42 (1991): 104.

⁴ The masterful study by Peter R. Ackroyd remains a key resource; *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century BC* (London: SCM Press, 1968).

⁵ See, e.g., N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996); Erich Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks*

rather scarce. The term *παρεπιδήμους*, which most translations render “exiles” in 1 Pet 1:1 and 2:11 (see, e.g., NRSV, ESV, NIV), appears elsewhere only in Heb 11:13. Likewise, *διασποράς*, “dispersion,” stands outside of 1 Pet 1:1 only in John 7:35 and James 1:1. The noun *παροίκους*, “aliens, sojourners,” appears only in 1 Pet 2:11, Eph 2:19, and with reference to Abraham and Moses in Acts 7; the related term *παροικία* is mentioned only in 1 Pet 1:17 and Acts 13:17.⁶

While the NT–authors can talk about exile without using specific terminology, the frequency and clustering of terms in 1 Peter 1–2 is notable. With an eye on the letter’s structure — the opening line (“to the exiles of the dispersion”) and the mention of “Babylon” at its closure (5:13) — the characterisation of 1 Peter as the most explicit exile–text of the New Testament is not too far fetched.⁷ Inspired by the letter’s pervasive recourse to the Old Testament, my study embarks on a comparative reading with Jeremiah 29 which ranks among the most explicit OT–perspectives on living in exile.⁸ In identifying similarities and differences between these two canonical witnesses, my study describes a biblical portrayal of what is demanded of those who live in an exilic situation and of those who care for them pastorally. Based on this discussion, I will consider in closing how “the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:3) sets these two texts apart and what the implications of this may be for Christians in the world today.

The Situation and Struggle of Jeremiah 29

Jeremiah 29 takes us into the community life of the first wave of exiles who were brought from Jerusalem to Babylon in 597 BCE. According to Jeremiah’s vision of the “good figs and bad figs” in ch. 24, this group has found favour in YHWH’s sight; they are commended for accepting rather than avoiding his judgment (cf. Jer 21:8–10) and are promised to return to their homeland. The discourse of Jer 25 sets forth a time–frame of 70 years for Babylon’s fall (v. 12) which is confirmed in Jer 29:10. As this figure is open for interpretation,⁹ chs. 26–29 depict various scenes of conflict about YHWH’s word. This struggle between Jeremiah and the supporters of a short exile, such as Hananiah and some other prophets (cf. 27:16; 28:3–4) spills over into Jer 29. Before

and Romans (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); John M. G. Barclay, *Negotiating Diaspora: Jewish Strategies in the Roman Empire* (LSTS 45; New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

⁶ Shively Smith’s recent volume addresses the “semantic slippage” between emigration, exile, and diaspora in more depth. I am working here with her understanding of *παροικία* (1 Pet 1:17; 2:11) and other related terms as “markers of the community’s identity abroad;” *Strangers to Family: Diaspora and 1 Peter’s Invention of God’s Household* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 7. Further discussion of the relevant lexical *Befund* of the LXX, Philo, and the NT is available in Chin, “Home.”

⁷ “1 Peter appropriates diaspora, with its kaleidoscopic meanings, as the root metaphor and principal situation of the addressees;” Smith, *Strangers*, 2–3.

⁸ See, e.g., Dan 1–6 or the visions of Ezekiel (I highly recommend Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* [VT Sup 76; Leiden: Brill, 2002]). Davids identifies a “tradition of Jewish letters to the exiles” (*First Epistle*, 14) which include alongside Jer 29 also 2 Apoc. Bar. 78–87, 2 Macc. 1:1–28. Smith’s *Strangers* adds an analysis of Daniel 1–6, Aristeas’ Letter, and Philo’s writings.

⁹ The temple’s restoration in 515 approximates 70 years, yet Jeremiah’s announcement relates to the fall of Babylon which occurs already in 539. Rather than a literal time–frame, the number 70 in Jer 25 and 29 symbolises the “fullness/completion” of God’s economy of judgment and salvation (cf. Isa 23.15). The phrase “end of exile” in itself is a complicated concept since many Jews chose to live outside the land after 539; cf. Hans M. Barstad, *A Way in the Wilderness: The “Second Exodus” in the Message of Second Isaiah* (JSSM 12; Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1989), 108.

we can address this issue, a short overview of the chapter is necessary.

Jeremiah's letter is addressed "to the surviving elders of the exiles" (vv. 1–3) and opens with YHWH's well-known advice to "build houses" and "plant gardens," and to "seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile" (vv. 4–7). This is followed by the tender announcement of divine benevolence ("plans for *shalom*") and a promise of the exiles' return to their land (vv. 10–14). While there are some glimpses of hope amidst the severe judgment of chs. 1–28,¹⁰ these words in Jer 29 mark a turning point in YHWH's disposition. Several of the previous declarations of judgment are reversed in 29:4–14 and the language of "building and planting" indicates that YHWH's work of restoration has begun.¹¹ Living in exile, according to Jer 29, means to stand on the other side of divine judgment but yet to wait for the promised inheritance. Life in Babylon has had its share of freedom in social and economic terms, but such comforts must not distract the exiles from reaping the full benefits of living in YHWH's presence on home soil.¹²

YHWH's "good plans" of Jer 29:11 are often not heard within this wider context. Such a reading inevitably fails to make mention of divine judgment and the elements of suffering and patience,¹³ but it also passes over the community's response to YHWH. As mentioned above, Jer 29 continues the topic of prophetic conflict (see vv. 8–9, 16–31). The opposition to Jeremiah's pastoral encouragement to live in peace and wait for God is encapsulated in v. 15 which quotes the exilic community as saying "YHWH has raised up prophets for us in Babylon" (cf. *נָבִיָּא* in Deut 18:15).¹⁴ This verse belongs directly to vv. 10–14 and is best understood as an adversative rejection of YHWH's tender words ("But you said:"): the exiles trust their own prophets rather than Jeremiah's letter from the home front.¹⁵ This response triggers in vv. 16–20 YHWH's

¹⁰ See esp. 3:14–18; 4:27, 5:10, 18; 10:1–16; 16:14–21; 23:1–8.

¹¹ For reversals, see, e.g., the covenant curse in 5:17, the collapse of marriages and family in 16:1–9, the lack of "peace" (*שָׁלוֹם*) in 4:10; 8:15; 12:12; 14:1), and the inefficacy of intercession (*הַתְּפִלָּה*) in 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). The verbs *בָּנָה* ("build") and *נָטַע* ("plant") are programmatic for Jeremiah's hope of restoration (cf. 1:10; 12:16; 18:9; 24:6).

¹² Robert Carroll suggests that this was a real temptation: "There was no great movement back from Babylon to Jerusalem. This lack of response to prophetic proclamation is not difficult to account for: most of the deportees had grown up and lived all their life in Babylon. . . . During that long period they would have settled into patterns of organized community life (cf. Jer 29);" *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 158.

¹³ The call for peaceful living in Jer 29:4–7 likewise cannot provide a manifesto for biblical pacifism when read in context; W. Derek Suderman, "Assyria the Ax, God the Lumberjack: Jeremiah 29, the Logic of the Prophets, and the Quest for a Nonviolent God," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32 (2014): 44–66.

¹⁴ This is a common literary feature in the book; cf. Samuel Hildebrandt, *Interpreting Quoted Speech in Prophetic Literature: A Study of Jeremiah 2.1–3.5* (VT Sup 174; Leiden: Brill, 2017).

¹⁵ Most scholars read v. 15 as the beginning of the next paragraph; alternatively, v. 15 is read with vv. 21–23 (Bright; Lundbom) or with vv. 20–21 (Holladay). For the redactional conversation around Jer 29 and the *crux interpretum* of v. 15, see William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 726–44. My reading of v. 15 as the finale of vv. 10–14 is based on the minus of vv. 16–20 in Jer-LXX, the use of *setumah* and "Thus says YHWH" in ch. 29, and the climactic use of speech quotations in Jer 2:25, 4:31, and 18:12; cf. Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 26–52* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 89, and Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 479.

resolution to execute his judgment on Jerusalem. No matter how positive Jer 29 begins, after the quoted words in v. 15 the remainder of the chapter is rather grim.

The struggle between divine promise and human response defines the exilic community of Jer 29. Upon closer attention to the context of YHWH's promises, the main thrust of this chapter is *not* "God's good plans" but Israel's rejection of just these plans. YHWH's words meant to alleviate the pain of uncertainty and hopelessness, yet Jer 29 delivers the sobering message that reaching the other side of judgment is no safeguard against self-sufficiency. Even with the restoration under way, the attempt to improve upon God's good plans is alive and, as in the community in Judah in Jer 40–44,¹⁶ may lead to no restoration at all.

Jeremiah 29 and the Exilic Community of 1 Peter

Returning from these tragic scenes to the community of 1 Peter, several parallels invite closer comparison. In terms of their rhetorical structure, both Jer 29 and 1 Peter begin by affirming their audience in their favoured standing before God who has granted them a "living hope" (1:3) and a privilege of revelation (1:10–12). As a transformation of the OT-framework of exile and return,¹⁷ 1 Peter reminds its readers of their "inheritance. . . kept in heaven" (1:4) and assures them that their suffering will last but "for a little while" (1:6; cf. 4:7; 5:10). Similar to Jer 29:4–14, the letter assures the exile that they are not further from God and world but that by being addressed as ἐκλεκτοῖς they are, in fact, closer to both.¹⁸

Reading Jer 29 and 1 Peter side-by-side shows that the place of exile is a sensitive situation that requires rhetorical and pastoral care. Both texts testify to an irresolvable tension: on the one hand, the audience finds itself in a new and exciting place in their personal history with God; on the other hand, the present experience of displacement and suffering lends little support to the reality of this new place. Both communities are guided towards coping with this tension by actively living in light of the transfer that has taken place. Jeremiah's audience is to build houses and plant gardens even on foreign soil; 1 Peter's audience is commended for loving Jesus though they have not seen him (1:8), to love one another *because* they have been born again (1:22–23),

¹⁶ What begins with harvest and peaceful living (40:10–12) ends in a bloody revolt and a fearful return to Egypt which, as in Jer 29, involves a blatant rejection of YHWH's goodwill which leads to judgment (42:10–17). For an insightful study of this section of Jeremiah, I recommend Keith Bodner, *After the Invasion: A Reading of Jer 40–44* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ This is entirely in keeping with other reinterpretations of the promised land in the NT (see, e.g., Matt 25:31–34; Eph 1:11–23; 5:1–5; Phil 3:17–4.1; Hebr 9:15–22). Cf. Oren R. Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God's Redemptive Plan* (NSBT 34; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

¹⁸ The appellation of divine election poses an intriguing parallel to Jeremiah's vision of the "good figs" in Jer 24 and also brings together the geographical and spiritual dimensions of exile that we saw in Jer 29: "The addressees are 'strangers' not by race, birth, or circumstances but because divine election has 'estranged' them;" J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Waco, TX: WordBooks, 1988), 7. As the list in 1:1 and most of the letter shows, the parameters of location and "living in the world" *do* matter, then and now, and must not be eclipsed by the spiritual dimension of exile. "The significance of the biblical identity of the elect resides neither in predestination, nor the future hopes, nor its privileges, but in its practical, moral and missiological implications for the present life of believers;" Stephen Ayodeji A. Fagbemi, *Who Are the Elect in 1 Peter? A Study in Biblical Exegesis and its Application to the Anglican Church of Nigeria* (Studies in Biblical Literature 104; New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 2.

and to “set your hope full on the grace that will be brought to you” (1:13).

Inasmuch as some readings of Jer 29 pass over the people’s rejection and God’s judgment, readings of 1 Peter that would eclipse the letter’s strong warnings would likewise miss the mark. That both texts emphasise future hope suggests that their readers may consider returning to the past as an attempt to resolve the current tension. The exiles in Jeremiah turn to their prophets which brought them to Babylon in the first place (cf. Jer 2:8; 6:13–14; 14:13; 23:14). The exiles of 1 Peter presumably have not gone that far, yet the stern calls for holiness from 1:13 onward speak into a real struggle with temptation. Rooted in the affirmation of 1:1–12, our author mounts in chs. 1–2 a sobering plea for faithfulness which constructs a firm line between past and present identity. He exhorts his readers to reflect in their lives the shift from their “former ignorance” to holiness (1:14–15),¹⁹ he draws a contrast to the “futile ways inherited from your forefathers” (1:18), and he reminds them of their transfer “out of darkness into [God’s] marvelous light” (2:9). The community is to live “with fear throughout the time of your exile” (1:17) and to participate in God’s “spiritual house” rather than stumbling over Christ, its cornerstone (2:4–8).

Held in this tension of privilege and perseverance, the pastoral concern of 1 Peter aims similar to Jeremiah’s for the unity and growth of the community. It is easy to imagine how the hope about an imminent return would stop Jeremiah’s addressees from planting and to building. Likewise, false ideas or scepticism about the “revelation of Christ” (1:5, 7, 13) could stand in the way of holy living.²⁰ Alongside its call for holiness and unity (2:1), 1 Peter admonishes the exiles to conduct themselves appropriately in relation to the world around them. We saw above that Jeremiah advocates a posture that is keenly aware of its own group identity (“build and marry”) but that also embraces a strategic position to its environment (“pray for Babylon”).²¹ In a similar manner, the readers of 1 Peter are called to “honourable conduct among the Gentiles” (2:12),²² to obey the authorities of governors and emperor (2:13–17), and to respect the authority structures within their own ranks (2:18–3:9).

Christ and Community: Living in Exile in 1 Peter and Today

¹⁹ “Such a transformation had to entail every aspect of their behaviour (ἐν πάσῃ ἀναστροφῇ); it involved the whole of a life that continued to be led in the midst of the hostile culture;” Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 121.

²⁰ According to Davids, v. 13 calls for a “careful evaluation of present behavior in the light of future goals and an unseen reality;” *First Epistle*, 66. Except for 1:12, the verb ἀποκαλύπτω and the noun ἀποκάλυψις refer in 1 Peter “to the future and final revelation;” John H. Elliot, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 37B; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 338.

²¹ For a well-balanced description of this tension, see Daniel Smith, “Jeremiah as Prophet of Nonviolent Resistance;” *JSOT* 43 (1989): 95–107. With reference to Jer 29, Smith concludes her discussion of the court tales of Daniel by observing that “the tales envision diaspora Jews, while subject to foreign powers, as participating in the civil and social life of their foreign environments successfully. . . . their challenges resemble the diaspora condition envisioned in 1 Peter;” *Strangers*, 116.

²² As in Jewish thought, the Christian hope of 1 Peter that such conduct would lead the Gentiles to “glorify God” (2:12) transforms exile into a positive category: “Israel’s dispersion among the Gentiles was no longer regarded as God’s judgement, but came to be seen as a divinely-given opportunity to glorify him among the Gentiles;” Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (transl. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM Press, 1958), 14.

While there are other aspects that invite comparing Jer 29 and 1 Peter (e.g., prayer or marital life), our discussion suffices to demonstrate that some fruitful conversation exists between these two letters. With the testimony of Jer 29 and other texts at hand, the struggle of exile and dispersion can be seen to form a core element of Jewish identity which quite naturally found its way as a formative element into the early Christian movement. Living in exile, in Jer 29 and 1 Peter, is a historical and social reality; yet, in both passages it is also a spiritual condition. The term “exile” becomes a metaphor for God’s people living in the tension between past and present identity, between being through judgment but not yet fully restored, between being God’s holy people and living in the world. Pastorally, this tension is met with compassion by both letter writers. Their affirmation and assurance, alongside their stern warnings, are composed in the pursuit of a healthy, holy, and missional community.

There are, of course, many obvious differences between Jer 29 and 1 Peter that need to be acknowledged. For the purpose of reading these two passages with Christians who today find themselves in geographical and/or spiritual exile, I have chosen to focus on the issue of human response. As we saw above, Jeremiah had addressed the first Israelites who have passed on to the other side of God’s judgment and for whom the restoration promises of land and life had started to unfold. Yet, resisting God’s call for patience, faithfulness, and unity, these exiles had preferred their own prophets and rejected God’s “good plans.” It is by way of this portrayal of promise and response that the Book of Jeremiah conveys the sobering truth that even judgment and exile have not brought about the envisioned change. Something else is needed and, thankfully, the book supplies this immediately in the promises of the New Covenant in Jer 30–31.²³

Here, then, lies the crucial difference between the exilic situation of Jer 29 and 1 Peter. According to Jer 31:31–34, God pledges himself to be the initiator, the enabler of his people’s covenant faithfulness (“I will put, I will write, I will be, I will forgive, I will remember”); however, how exactly this new divine action is to be undertaken remains unclear in the realm of the OT. The message of 1 Peter fills this gap by grounding the readers’ exilic identity in the life and work of Christ: the transition from judgment to living hope is described as being “born again. . . through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1:3), the reward for this hope is linked to Christ’s return (1:13), and the exiles are accepted by God as those who are “ransomed. . . with the precious blood of Christ;” 1:19; 2:5). As for living in the tension and suffering of exile, Christ’s suffering becomes their foundation to persevere (2:21–25; 3:18; 4:1, 12–14; 5:1). In other words, what sets the exilic community of 1 Peter apart from that of Jer 29 is that Christ has borne the pain of exile in their place, ahead of them. No doubt, the negative example of Jer 29 and the real possibility of rejecting the exilic tension *as* God’s “good plan” remains alive today for Christians. But to the degree that we see Jeremiah’s New Covenant fulfilled through Christ’s exile and return, believers today can find strength to resist the temptation to short-cut their own exile. Called to be God’s and to be in the world, faithful Christians can hold on to same promise that stands at the conclusion of 1 Peter: “After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (5:10).

²³ The phrase in v. 14 (“I will turn [their] turnings,” שְׁבִיתִי נְשִׁבוֹתָם) ties the message of Jer 29 tightly to Jer 30–33 which uses this expression at many key points; see 30:3, 18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7, 11, 26. For other anticipations of this “turn” in the book, see also 4:4 and 16:19–21.