

A RESPONSE TO TIM GREEN AND ROGER HAHN,
 “PERIL AND PROMISE OF EXILE”
 Stephen P. Riley

It is a great pleasure to write a response to Drs. Green and Hahn’s paper. I think they have done an excellent job of bringing a number of important issues to light with regard to the topic of exile in the biblical canon. It is my hope to offer three brief remarks that may further the dialogue in a helpful manner.

First, it is important that we reflect on the issue of homecoming as it relates to nature of Israel’s Exile and the biblical portrayal of it. I appreciate Dr. Green’s section on lamentation. He is correct in asserting that one of Israel’s primary theological resources for dealing with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the resulting forced migration to foreign lands was lament. Two things about lament within the context of exile are significant. First, lament was not always the clean thing we contemporary people of faith make it. Lament often included strong words of curse toward enemies and deep questioning of God’s presence in the midst of unimaginable suffering. Dr. Green rightfully cautions us to not take exile as a motif lightly, especially in our current context where brothers and sisters are forcibly moved from their homes and are often without refuge; however, I would suggest we often don’t take lament seriously enough sometimes. I would contend, in light of 586 B.C.E., we miss the extraordinary pain Israel felt at the loss of not only their physical representation of home, but their theological identity. In lament, Israel begins to wrestle with what it means to confess God as lord of all creation and as the one who either allowed or caused the destruction and ruin of the very temple that signified the divine presence. This is no small thing. It is also something for which very few contemporary people of faith, especially those in North America, have an analogy. Much of the literature about the Church in exile points to the loss of prestige or position of influence as the mark of being in exile.¹ Although this may certainly be a point worthy of reflection, I am not convinced that it is truly an exile in the sense that Israel experienced it or that it is one we should truly lament.

Second, the exile and its lament for Israel also brought a hope of homecoming. When Israel laments, even in their most extreme forms, they end with affirmation of trust and praise to the God they believe will do something to remedy their situation. Namely, in Exile, Israel believes that God will return them to the land of their belonging. I think this is an important motif when thinking about Exile. To where do we wish to return? Certainly, an exile does not ever truly return to the same home. No home will ever remain the same, but most exiles long for home in some form. If we take the models of Frost and Beach, we come up with a return to the 1950s or some other bygone era. I’m pretty sure that is not what we want. Perhaps then someone might suggest that we claim that our true home is in heaven and that is where we are to return. While that is fine, the danger in this response can become an otherworldly theology orientation where we simply hold on until we die or Christ returns and engagement with this world becomes

¹ See for instance, Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006); Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

unimportant or nonexistent. I think reflecting on the homecoming aspect of exile might help us flesh out what we mean when talking about this motif for the contemporary church.

Moving on, I think a point of contemplation where the biblical motif of exile might be fruitful for our contemporary situation is that of reconciliation. If exile means being removed from one's home and forced to shape a new identity, then perhaps thinking about exile and return as a motif for personal and societal reconciliation is one possible way the Church could employ the biblical imagery today. For example, in exile, Israel expresses feelings of abandonment, hopelessness, and disenfranchisement. In Ezekiel, in the midst of such language, God moves the temple to come be among the people in exile. I wonder if, in the midst of so many who are either physically, emotionally, or spiritually in a place of exile--persons who feel lost, separated, disenfranchised, and without hope-- we might find ways of reading scripture that would help us reach out toward reconciliation. That would help our part of the Church hear the cries of our brothers and sisters in a different way and be moved to stand in solidarity or work alongside for peace and renewal among our inner selves, each other, and God.

Finally, I agree with Dr. Green that the exile is the place that Israel begins to give serious shape to historical narrative and theological identity. There is no doubt that the exile forces Israel to wrestle with a whole host of questions about what it means to be the covenant people of God. However, I think it important that we remember that Israel's canon does not offer one answer to that question. The exile gives rise to more than one theological trajectory. Not only does Deuteronomistic History (roughly Deuteronomy-2Kings) get its shape, but later there is the Chronicler's History and other perspectives that are offered for what it means to be a good covenantal Israelite. What is important for our contemporary reflection is that in our globalized context, we cannot think that the North American church has any sort of normative corner on the theological market. If exile as a motif offers us a way forward, we may want to remember that our own canon often offers us a dialogue of witnesses to what it means to be faithful to God. This dialogue is a good thing, because though the faithfulness of God never waivers, our contexts are continually shifting and we necessarily must have the ongoing ability to dialogue about what it means to be faithful to God in our contexts.