

A RESPONSE TO GREEN AND HAHN,  
 “PERIL AND PROMISE OF EXILE”

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Exile as a theological category is provocative and enriching; as a personal experience it is provoking and heartbreaking. The tension between theological category and personal experience is indeed full of Peril and Promise, and Drs. Green and Hahn do wonderful justice to this tension in their treatment of the biblical witnesses to exile. The connections in this conference between biblical exile and the post-Christendom context of North America are long overdue, but certainly complex and deserve careful handling. I will respond with the ways I see Green and Hahn's work as so timely and valuable, and along the way explore a handful of questions that occurred to me as I read. I am responding from my context as a teacher of undergraduates who come from congregations that reflect the whole spectrum of North American Christianity. My daily work is inviting them to consider Scripture with the strengths and tools of the Wesleyan way.

I wanted to stand and cheer as I read Dr. Green's treatment of Old Testament lamentation. Congregations across the theological and social spectrums have fostered a reading of these texts that echoes Marilla Cuthbert's withering judgment of teenage angst in the movie version of *Anne of Green Gables*: "To despair is to turn one's back on God" (without noticing the privilege of situation on which such a pronouncement is usually based).<sup>1</sup> Despair, grief, despondency, fear, etc.: these emotions are often seen as having no place in the *Christian life*, and therefore our preachers and shepherds do not always know how to proclaim them from the *pages of Scripture*. I routinely hear these passages dismissed, either as evidencing a lack of trust in God among Jews, or the just desserts of the failed nation of Israel, or even positively, as suffering that is now fully resolved by the work of the Messiah and no longer worth worrying about. These texts tend not to be preached or taught for their own sakes, but as mere signposts in the metanarrative of redemption. How can we recover a balanced approach that gives them full voice in our gathered body?

This dismissal is clearly inadequate pastorally; how can we expect our people to know full redemption, when we implicitly (or explicitly!) denounce the deep reaches of suffering reflected in exilic texts? How can we equip the saints for life in exile, without acknowledging either the pain experienced there or the sin that intersects with exile, without directing them to passages that testify to the experience? For instance, there are more psalms of lament than any other kind; how can we not utilize them? These texts provide toeholds in the canon, places where people and churches in exile can read and hear that God was there in exile with our ancestors in the faith, and thus can be trusted to hear and respond to our lament now. These passages ought to be treasured resources for discipleship.

Beyond the pastoral implications, however, and more relevant to this session, are the canonical ones. If we do not read these texts for their own sakes, if we will not hear this plentiful refrain in the Old Testament, but insist on reading Jeremiah and Company only for their predictions of Jesus, where does that leave us? Can we claim to believe in the plenary inspiration of Scripture if we allow it to speak only on certain topics? Can we make any serious claim to the Old

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<sup>1</sup> *Anne of Green Gables*, Sullivan Entertainment, 1986.

Testament's value, if we refuse to let Israel's experience of judgment through exile lead us to confession, if only Jesus and Paul can call us to repentance?

A full-orbed understanding of the Bible must actively resist the temptation to write off Israel as a failed experiment in theocracy, or only the vehicle that delivers the Christ. Green's vision of diasporic identity as divine calling is so helpful here. Christian readers of the Old Testament must learn to hear the voice of God at work in God's people *between* the fall of Jerusalem and the birth of Jesus. If nothing else, it is helpful to remember that Jews in diaspora became core members in many of the fledgling Christian churches around the Empire.

Green's reference to *paqad* is a pertinent contribution to my own work, in two ways. First, considering God's response to sin as "visitation" strikes me as appropriate for Wesleyans. Even the consequences of sin are delivered relationally, in the coming of God to God's people. The exile is no cold eviction notice from a distant, negligent slumlord; the incarnating God, who eventually comes to us in human form, visits Israel with their judgment in hand, and accompanies them into exile. This has tremendous potential to ameliorate the common caricature among my students (which also pervades our churches), that God is angry and vengeful in the Old Testament, but loving and nurturing in the New.

Second, my own work with the barrenness texts of the Old Testament and with Ruth brings me to *paqad* from another angle. When Sarah conceived Isaac and Hannah conceived Samuel's younger siblings, it was because Yahweh "*paqad*-ed" them; he "visited" or "attended to" these barren mothers by bringing life to their wombs (Gen. 21.1; 1 Sam. 2:21). In Ruth 1:6, Naomi hears rumor that Yahweh has "visited" Judah, bringing bread to end the famine that drove her family into Moab. In these uses of *paqad*, the visitation of God brings the gift of life, a truly evocative thought in connection to the exilic use of the word, where the consequences of Israel's sin lead to repentance and new life, first back in the land, and of course ultimately in the ministry of Jesus, as Dr. Hahn so rightly insists.

This reference to so-called 'women's texts' leads me to another thought, admittedly undeveloped, which I will merely pose as a question. The North American church at large may very well find ourselves in exile in new ways, but there are those among us who have *never* felt at home, even among Nazarene brothers and sisters. To the extent that women, Native-American, African-American, Latino/a, LGBTQ, or immigrant Nazarenes have lived in exile among us, disenfranchised from full participation or influence, how can we acknowledge these failings and be reconciled together, as an appropriate and necessary response to the whole church's humbling loss of influence in the mainstream culture?

Moving into the New Testament texts with Dr. Hahn, I came out of my chair again to exult with him that Jesus declares the end of the exile. The optimism of grace we proclaim calls us to heed the challenges Dr. Hahn highlights. As a holiness church, we dare not dwell in the exile when we are offered a home. The sense of loss Dr. Hahn warns us against simply cannot become either permanent or primary as we consider our redeemed position in the economy of God. This is the same movement made in the lament texts; we notice that we are never allowed to stay in our mud puddle, but are called to move beyond the lament, back to praise, thanksgiving, trust,

repentance, and proclamation. We are called to say boldly with the psalmist, "But for me, it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, *to tell of all your works*" (73:28).

I would argue that proclamation of God's saving work, and the coming of the Kingdom, is somehow emptier without the experience of lamentation to give it depth. How can someone be saved if they never perceive a danger from which they need saving? Likewise, joy in the homecoming from exile, the welcome of the "already" Kingdom, is shallow if the loss of the homeland has been willfully ignored, or goes unacknowledged. Both streams in the text are absolutely vital, and must be held in tension with one another. Redemption without exile is cheap, but exile without redemption is defeat. My question here is, (how) does the balance between these streams shift in response to the needs of a given season in a given context? Surely, our North American church *needs* to acknowledge the mud puddle we are sitting in? Isn't it helpful, even incumbent upon us, to concede the loss of our general cultural influence, at least so as to go about our repentance more fully, and our proclamation in more effective ways? I see this conference as calling us to that crossroads. How long do we sit with the truth of this loss before we qualify as "wallowers"?

The perils of exile theology are, after all, derived from the same mistake the Israelites made. If Christians in North America insist on remaining in the exile as our primary paradigm, we are forgetting, or ignoring, or denying that we are Kingdom citizens. Israel succumbed to the mistaken belief that their citizenship resided in the socio-political entities of Israel/Judah, thinking as long as they kept up the rituals that maintained the Temple complex, and played the games of social climbers and wealth hounds, they were safe from judgment because they held citizenship in an earthly kingdom that paid homage to Yahweh. They lived in Yahweh's physical kingdom and thought that was enough; we live in Yahweh's spiritual kingdom, so dare not keep knocking on the gates as though we aren't already residents.

Thank you for a thought-provoking and spirit-enlivening paper, Drs. Green and Hahn. I will be fueled by these thoughts for many more miles!