

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

New York has the largest black population of any city in the United States. In these days the Black population of New York and the country as a whole has been restive around the issue of what appears to be a recurrent pattern of Police killings of unarmed Black men with out consequences. As a consequence, particularly young black people have public rallied around the assertion that "black lives matter". I read this paper against this background and my interest peeked as I did so to know how indeed did the Biblical Narratives speak of the "Peril and Promise of Exile" and how they may speak to me and those to whom I preach in my context of angst "today"? Paul Tillich's "method of correlation" in which relevant theology is constructed by answering the existential questions of one's context from the revelation/ Kerygma comes. In my context, the questions "today" that rise to the surface, have to do with whether God (and his Church) is concerned for the value of the lives of black people. Do black lives really matter to him, and if they do, what must His church do about what seems to be a wanton disregard for these lives by the most powerful forces in this society (law enforcement and the judiciary)? These are my existential questions -- and Green and Hahn in explaining the mindset of the people of God in the Biblical Narrative undergoing "the exilic experience", gives me a "theological handle" to understand and address what many black people, especially millennials in my New York context are feelings and are trying to express. We can engage in lament, reimagining and honest confession today resulting in already "blessing" the future generation in anticipation though not yet fully extricated from Exilic type conditions .

While Green and Hahn rightly, in my opinion, question and implicitly reject the "faddish" use of the "Exile motif" by elements of the contemporary church in America and argue that this view of the Church is inconsistent with the New Testament church's self understanding, their description of the exilic experience in the Biblical Narrative as that of "displacement, marginalization, persecution and cultural shift" echoes the cries of the black population in these times. According to them, the exilic experience is one in which persons were "stripped of cultural power", had personal rights infringed upon resulting "in actual violence, forced removal and disenfranchisement". They say "exile was, exile is, indeed the catastrophic reality of a community whose past is now a dim memory, whose presence is characterized by despair and whose future has all but disappeared". This sentiment is what I hear people in my context expressing.

Lament in the Biblical Narrative, in response to the experience of exile, frees me to embrace lament for myself and my context, “to participate in the cries of dereliction”: ‘Why, How long and when?’ I understand that lamentation allows the people of God to "see and to name the destruction, fear and the despair of exile without concern for negative repercussions from outside sources". Exile does not call for cover up of reality, derogation of those who struggle with paralysis or shallow or empty prompts to move on. Exiles then engaged in lamentation with sincerity and honesty and we do so now too.

The Biblical Narrative indicates that the community may however move beyond “denial fear and anger” to bold imagining. There can be a creative reimagining of what the writers call the “formative communal narrative and practices... to reimagine the nature of the Divine presence”. "Today" Blacks (millennials and others) may indeed be led by the Church to revisit what the fundamental Biblical narratives say about the value of human life to God and what is the history of God's identification with and Liberation of those who are oppressed, helpless and hopeless. In the words of Green and Hahn, to “reimagine that narrative in such a way that would speak identity life and promise in our present exilic reality”.

The contemporary Church must be a "colony" of the Kingdom of God embracing and advocating Justice, Peace (Shalom) and Joy in the Holy Spirit. Regrettably a hostile and violent context for Blacks seems to be a well entrenched status quo in America but the Church must resist being coopted by those destructive "powers" that define life in terms of political influence and hegemonic power. We need to humbly and honestly confess that we have hankered for the power and influence but that we realize that these forces are the real precursors of bondage and will only prove to make the Church impotent to provide promise and hope to a community who suffer at the hands of the powers.