



Missional Journal

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By the Waters of Babylon

Psalm 137 gives voice to the agony of exile. The Jews taken captive by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar must deal with the pain of displacement and the mockery of their foes. What does it mean to be the chosen people in such a time and place? Has God abandoned them? Is there hope for a better future?

We cannot over-emphasize the enormous impact this change had on the religious life of the exiles. We hear their deep confusion in the question: "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (vs. 4) Can you worship God if you can't offer sacrifices? What will happen to the worship of Yahweh in the land where the gods of Babylon hold sway?

A number of scholars have suggested that the image of exile is an appropriate metaphor for the Western church. Michael Frost writes: "The experience that faced the Jewish exiles mirrors the church's experience today. In fact, the biblical metaphor that best suits our current times and faith situation is that of *exile*. Just like the Jewish exiles, the church today is grieving its loss and is struggling with humiliation. The ground has slipped from under the church. . . . The passing of Christendom might be compared to the fall of Jerusalem, and there is no going back." (*Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* [Hendrickson Publishers, 2006], p. 9.)

For all of us interested in the welfare of the church today, Frost raises a critical issue. Is it true that Christendom has collapsed, and is there really no return? These are questions that can be fairly debated. Despite the doctrine of separation

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of church and state, the United States has through most of its history functioned as a kind of "quasi" Christendom. The narrative of a "Christian America," tax breaks for churches and clergy, and the political influence of the Religious Right are all manifestations of a Christendom culture. **In Christendom the church is at or near the center of cultural power: it has weight; it commands respect.** In many places in our land you still find evidence of this.

But all of us sense that things are changing. "Scientism" (the view that science has the answers to all of life's questions) has created a structure that radically separates public "facts" from private "values" or "opinions." Science deals with objective facts--we are told--the stuff of "real" life. Faith, on the other hand, is relegated to the private, subjective realm. The Christian claim that Jesus represents the ultimate revelation of God's saving love for the world is understood in this framework--a private opinion that has no place in the public square.

As Christians we feel this "slippage." Major metropolitan areas in particular find the church on the margins rather than in the center. The movement toward a post-Christian culture seems to be accelerating. So, how should we respond? What is to be done?

It seems to me that there are three options churches (and individual believers) can follow:

1. Reclaim the Center

This option is the choice for those focused on fighting back. These folks say the culture war with secularism, pluralism, neo-paganism, etc. can be won. The Christian foundations of America can be restored. If we organize politically, march for Jesus, change the Supreme Court, pray more intensely, home-school our kids, and/or give more money to certain para-church organizations, we can recapture the center.

This approach is attractive to many sincere Christians and must be taken seriously. Perhaps it will succeed. But I suspect it will not. Unfortunately, too many of those who pursue this track are deeply marked by anger and resentment over the loss of Christian place and privilege. They sometimes voice sentiments similar to the psalmist who expresses pleasure in

the idea of Babylonian babies getting their heads bashed in. **While such expressions may rally the Christian troops, they are unlikely to commend the gospel to the unconvinced.**

Those of us embracing the missional turn believe that the marginalization of the church in the West will increase rather than decrease as the century proceeds. The twentieth century collapse of Christendom in Europe and Canada seems a more likely scenario for America than a return to a dominant Christian culture.

2. Circle the Wagons

Another response to exile is a defensive posture that relinquishes all attempts to penetrate the surrounding culture with the gospel. If the forces of Babylon are too powerful, believers have no alternative but to turn inward, defend the perimeters, and wait for the coming of the Lord.

Under these conditions the goal for the church becomes maintenance. We remind ourselves that we are not responsible for *results*. Our calling is rather to be *faithful*. Unfortunately faithfulness is too often construed as returning to some golden age in the church--a generation, a century, or centuries ago--when the church was *really the church*.

There are numerous difficulties with this approach. First, it understands the church's holiness too much in terms of separation and withdrawal. Second, it tends to view the past through rose-colored glasses: the good old days were probably never as good as they appear to our nostalgic memories! But the even greater problem is that this inward and backward look closes off the spiritual creativity that could lead the church into a new and fruitful place of service in God's kingdom.

3. Imagine a New Day

This option is the most challenging and, for missional church leaders, the most attractive and faithful to the gospel. It involves embracing the marginality of the Western church as a reality that offers new possibilities for the church to relearn its true mode of being in the world.

The metaphor of exile may help at this point. The move from Jerusalem to Babylon confronted the Jewish remnant with an adaptive challenge that shattered many false notions about their relationship to Yahweh--and their identity as his covenant people. Though they initially questioned whether they could "sing the Lord's song in a strange land," they found that indeed they could!

The prophet Jeremiah spoke realistically to their situation: you are going to be in Babylon for a while, so deal with it! "Build houses and settle down Marry and have sons and daughters Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile" (Jer. 29:5-7). In terms of our discussion, we can say that option 1 is not a possibility for the remnant. You can't go back to the old ways (at least until the Persians destroy Babylon). Option 2 is a possibility, but not one that Jeremiah advocates. Instead, he encourages them to think of Babylon as home and to pray for the prosperity of the city!

This opens up new possibilities for the people of God. Daniel and his three friends find places of service and influence in the royal court where they can testify to the presence and power of Yahweh. The loss of the Jerusalem temple encourages the organization of the synagogue movement which will later play such a large role in the spread of the gospel around the Mediterranean world. And the half-century of reflection on the sins of the fathers leads to the reform movements of Ezra and Nehemiah.

It is in this sense that Alan Roxburgh speaks of the exile as a metaphor of hope: "Exile is a symbol of God's gracious preparation, not God's abandonment! Babylon was the place in which Israelites had to fundamentally rethink their understanding of God and the tradition they had taken for granted. Only out of this long process would a new imagination--a new identity as God's people--begin to emerge. The Babylonian Exile was Israel's period of transition." (*The Sky is Falling!?! [ACI Publishing, 2005], p.75*)

If the metaphor of exile "works" as an analogy for understanding the post-Christendom church, then missional leaders may take hope. **What appears at first to be disaster may actually be God's opportunity to re-imagine what**

faithfulness to the gospel looks like in the 21st century.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Dave', written in a cursive style.

In the next issue I'll reflect a bit more on how the future might be "re-imagined."