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ON A THEOLOGY FOR MODERN BABYLONIANS: THE EXILE AS A BASIS FOR DOING “BIBLICAL THEOLOGY”

DANIEL L. SMITH

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to say that the Bible is “the Word of God”? Certainly it must not mean that it is a word that comes to us outside of history, or apart from the actual life experiences of ourselves, or the faith community who first produced this collection of writings that we call “Scripture.” Robert Barclay, the main theologian of the first two generations of Quakerism, wrote that there are essentially two ways to experience the leading of God: either by what he called “direct and unmediated revelation” (what we moderns call “personal experience”), or by secondary messages based on someone else’s direct experiences. But in the same way that we “hear” God in the midst of our real lives and our daily experiences (and are thus influenced by them in our interpretation of what we hear), so we “hear” secondary messages through other human experiences that clearly influence how they understand and interpret what they hear. Scripture is thus among the secondary sources—and therefore we cannot ignore the lives and experiences of those from whom we have the Scriptures. In this essay, I have been asked to reflect on the possible theological meaning of one of the most significant historical events that influenced the Ancient Hebrews, and the writing of the Bible, the military defeat and mass deportation of the southern Kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C.E.¹

THE EXILE OF ANCIENT JUDAH AND THE BIBLE OF THE OPPRESSED

The two most critically important events in the history of Ancient Israel that influenced the writing of the Hebrew Bible are the Exodus and the Exile. The Exodus of a group of former slaves under the

leadership of Moses and the defeat of the nation of Judah and the mass deportation of a number of its residents are events that have clear parallels to the life experience of modern oppressed peoples.² If the Exodus was the liberation of a minority from slave conditions, Exile was the experience of military defeat, deportation, and minority conditions in a new and strange land. Exile ended the days of independence for Ancient Israel. The Deuteronomic Historian (that is Joshua—2 Kings) interpreted the exile as punishment for the sins of the monarchy, and the Hebrews lived under foreign occupation from the Exile until well into the Common Era of Judaism and Christianity. From the final editing of the Hebrew Bible to the final editions of the New Testament, the entire Christian Bible is a product of a people under military and economic occupation. Is it possible that Americans of the dominant European/Caucasian background will therefore find this book difficult to apply to their normal lives without massive compromise of its actual meaning for an occupied minority people? To pursue this question, let us first review the events of the Exile itself, and why it is an event of such major proportions.

THE CONTEXT OF EMPIRE

As Noth suggested, the Exile is correctly seen as the last event in a series that can be thought of as “the fall” of Israelite power in the Ancient Near East.³ The crisis events faced by Judah really begin, therefore, with the threat of the Neo-Assyrians even before the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Otzen⁴ has pointed out that the rise of the Davidic-Solomonic empire was largely possible because of the vacuum left by a declining Egyptian power and the emergent empire of the Assyrians in the North and East. Tiglath-Pileser III is considered the true inaugurator of Assyrian power on an “Empire scale.” He is credited with a major reform of the Assyrian administration and the Assyrian war-machine that would eventually conquer Israel. Furthermore, it was the Assyrians who began the practice of deporting and sometimes relocating conquered populations. This exchange of population resulted, according to 2 Kings 17, in a massive religious upheaval with a spread of foreign cults and religious practices. After the fall of Israel, Judah continued as an independent state. The Assyrian Empire eventually crumbled, and was replaced by the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

King Jehoiakim died in 598, and Jehoiachin, 18 years old (2 Kings 24:8), had reigned for only three months when the Babylonians struck. In 597, Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, and the Babylonians took their first group of exiles. While this initial group was small, it is important to note that it was the king and aristocracy who were removed, in an attempt to remove leadership and the potential for revolt.

Zedekiah was made “king” by Nebuchadnezzar, but in time, Zedekiah also sought to rebel against Babylon (against the prophet Jeremiah’s warning, to be sure! Jer. 27–29). The resulting siege, recounted in 2 Kings 25:1–2, ended with a breach in the wall and Jerusalem itself was occupied. This time Jerusalem suffered severe destruction. Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar’s chosen ruler, tried to escape but was captured and suffered brutal punishment (25:7). This exile, as related in 2 Kings 25:11ff and Jer. 52:15ff, was more general than the surrender of Jehoiachin. Only some of the “poorest of the land” were left to be “vinedressers” and “ploughmen” according to the text.⁵ Included in the events were executions of some of Zedekiah’s coconspirators (2 Kings 25:18–21). Nebuchadnezzar then appointed Gedaliah the governor, who moved his capital to Mizpah: a move possibly indicating the extent of the destruction of Jerusalem. It appears that Jeremiah was also among those who joined Gedaliah.

The Chronicler in 2 Chron. 36:21–22 rather briefly summarizes the entire Exile experience by telescoping it into the words “the land enjoyed its Sabbaths,” and attention is then promptly turned to Cyrus at the end of the events of Exile.

THE CONQUESTS OF CYRUS

It is inconceivable that the victories of Cyrus the Persian would have passed unnoticed by the Jews in exile. Deutero-Isaiah’s famous hymn to Cyrus (Isa. 44–45), and the oracles against Babylon (Isa. 43; 47; 48), seem to indicate a knowledge that the Persian victory was coming, and there is no reason to suppose that they were all written after the fact.

When Cyrus was in control of Babylon in 539, he began his policy of returning cult statues to their rightful places. Consistent with this is the Edict allowing the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem, under the mission of Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1–6). The text of Ezra jumps in chapter 7, verse 1, to the reign of Artaxerxes. We are thus

left with a gap in the historical accounts of some 70 years before the story of Ezra's mission to Jerusalem. This, then, goes beyond the time frame we are immediately interested in.

What is of particular interest in these events is how the exile community reacts to the return, and how this reflects the experience of the exile itself. I have gone into great detail on this matter elsewhere,⁶ but suffice it to say that when we deal with texts in Ezra-Nehemiah such as the community referring to itself as the "Sons of the Exile," and "The Holy Seed," and is worried that members of this community are "intermarrying" with nonmembers, it is clear that a community has been created by the experience of exile that is very self-conscious. Indeed, it appears that they thought of themselves as the *real* Jews, as opposed to those who did not experience exile!

Perhaps this "community" that forms from the disaster is similar to the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, who periodically meet to regain a sense of shared crisis and disaster, which no one else can fully understand. This strong group affiliation that we see is a sign of a deeply felt tragedy among this people—and is certainly similar to the nationalist reactions of the traumatized peoples of the former Soviet Union or longer term oppression of Native Americans in the United States. This trauma most certainly affects the Bible.

THE CONDITIONS OF CONQUEST AND EXILE

What do we know about what the Exiles actually went through in Babylon? We know that empires treated their subject populations, and conquered territories, as massive sources of resources and labor. The condition of the earlier Assyrian exiles appears to reflect their economic importance. Chains were rare, and animals and supplies are depicted in the reliefs. In cuneiform texts one finds commands of rulers to take care of prisoners and prevent the soldiers from taking advantage of them. Josephus, however, in his review of the history of the "prisoners of war" taken to Babylon, spoke of binding and chains. Whether this can be taken to be historically reliable, and how far it is reconstructed on the basis of his time period, is unclear—but note the language about "fetters" in Jer. 40:1 (compare Nah. 3:10).

Empire suggests certain sociopolitical realities, and Larson sums this up graphically as "a huge military and administrative apparatus designed to secure a constant flow of goods from the periphery to center"⁷

Therefore, by the end of the Assyrian presence in Palestine, Assyria was engaged in an economic "strangulation" through tribute payments, and the religiously based symbolization of occupation and conquest. We have no reason to suspect that the Babylonians were any easier on the land, or the population. We know, for example, that the Assyrian treatment of conquered territories was severe.⁸ There was a punishing tribute that required robbing the very temple walls (2 Kings 16:8, 17ff; 18:15), taxing the people heavily (2 Kings 15:20; 18:14ff), and finally the physical removal of significant numbers of the population itself.

Biblical traditions of proclamation against Babylon lead one to believe that Babylonian policies were also severe. The words of the oracles in Jer. 50:1–51:58 threaten punishment of Babylon for its severity (50:15-16, 29; 51:20-22) and idolatry (50:2, 36, "A sword for her diviners"; 51:44; etc.). The imagery of "prison" and "prisoners" is a significant metaphor from the Exilic period. All of these observations support the contention that the details of the Neo-Assyrian practice serve to illuminate the tactics and policies of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Therefore, the social impact of Empire was already well known to the Jewish people by the propaganda of defeat even before the exile of the southern Kingdom became a reality. Thus, deportation *was an act of Empire*, or "propaganda by the deed." As it was a policy largely perfected by the Neo-Assyrians before the Neo-Babylonians, it is important to consider the Assyrian practice.

Oded has estimated that over three centuries in which Assyrian deportation was practiced, 4,500,000 people were forcibly uprooted and exiled.⁹ The largest single deportation was 208,000 taken from Babylonia in the South into Assyrian territory in the North. *These numbers dwarf even the highest estimates for the Babylonian Exile of the Jews from Judah.*

For the Babylonian Exile, 2 Kings 24:14 says that there were 10,000 captives, but then in vs. 16 it lists 7,000 "men of valor," and 1,000 craftsmen. Jer. 52:28ff lists the following: in Nebuchadnezzar's seventh year, 3,023 Jews, in his eighteenth year, 832, and in the twenty-third year, 745, yielding a total of 4,600. On the other hand, the "Exile Return (the so-called 'Golah') list" of Ezra 2 suggests that the number of those who returned (if that is what this list really is) was 42,360.

The usual figure is taken to be "a typical family" times the 4,600 who are assumed to be only men, and thus the result is in the vicinity

of 20-25,000 (4-5 members of an immediate family). However, if only “important” men were counted, heads of households, etc., then the total figure could easily be much higher. If Albright once argued, on the basis of archaeological remains, that the population of Judah in the eighth century was approximately 250,000, and fell to roughly half that number between 597 and 586 then surely we can find a reasonable middle ground.¹⁰ Significantly, it is clear that whole families were deported by both the Neo-Assyrians and the Neo-Babylonians. This is concluded from (A) the typical phrase, “people, great and small, male and female . . .”; (B) the reliefs; (C) administrative lists of deportees; and finally (D) Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles, advising them to “Take wives and have sons, and take wives for your sons and give daughters in marriage . . .” (Jer. 29) The Neo-Babylonian system appears to have been more selective, rather than simply deporting large portions of the populations. (See 2 Kings 15:29; 17:6; 24:14-16; Jer. 52:28-30). It is clear that the purpose of taking whole families is to remove the major incentive to return to the homeland and thus to encourage settlement. In the case of those Judeans who stayed after the restoration, this policy appears to have succeeded. So, if whole families were taken, how can we arrive at the total number of exiles? If only men were counted, given the predominantly patriarchal structure of the time, then families are to be estimated among the exiles. But by what number does one multiply? A wife and two children sounds too modern. Three children? Six? Estimates will obviously vary widely, depending on one’s decision on this matter. Certainly, the ancient Hebrews considered large families to be a blessing. But once it is granted that a large enough body of people were exiled in order to form large “communities” of disaster and exile victims, then the specific numbers become less relevant. To summarize, a self-conscious body of victims was created, and they are responsible for the final editing and arrangement of the Bible—it is the work of their “Meeting for Sufferings!”

WERE THE EXILES “SLAVES” IN BABYLON? NO . . . AND YES.

Slavery is obviously the most explicit example of dominated minorities. It is often suggested in studies of the Babylonian Exile that the exiles were not slaves. This is usually accompanied by references to late biblical texts that mention economically prosperous Jews who

either stayed in Mesopotamia because of their success, or contributed heavily to the return from exile (Ezra 2/ Neh. 7). It is important to point out, however, that there appeared to be a difference in the economic contributions as recorded in Ezra 1 for Sheshbezzar’s return, and the more affluent contributions of Ezra 2, under Zerubbabel’s return. Galling reasoned that the “success” of the Babylonian Jews was in the time between the fall of Babylon to Cyrus, and the return under Zerubbabel.¹¹

But do we really know what we are talking about when we say that the exiles were, or were not, slaves? As Americans, our image of slavery is probably indelibly marked by African-American slavery in our own history. But that is not the only form that slavery has taken throughout history. So, to answer the question about the Babylonian exiles, it must first be determined what one means by “slavery.” The way around the problems of definition, according to Kopytoff, is a *social* analysis of slavery:

The slave begins as a social outsider and undergoes a process of becoming some kind of insider. A person, stripped of his previous social identity is put at the margins of a new social group and is given a new social identity in it The Sociological issue in slavery is thus not the dehumanization of the person, but rather his or her re-humanization in a new setting and the problems that this poses for the acquirers¹²

This symbolic analysis is preeminently represented by Patterson in his book, *Slavery and Social Death*.¹³ Patterson reviewed the structure of the slave relationship using data from over 40 different slave systems from all over the world, and in different time periods. Common to all is the significance of symbolic institutions:

The symbolic instruments may be seen as the cultural counterpart to the physical instruments used to control the slave’s body. In much the same way that . . . whips were fashioned from different materials, the symbolic whips of slavery were woven from many areas of culture. Masters all over the world used the special rituals of enslavement upon first acquiring slaves: the symbolism of naming, of clothing, of hairstyle, of language, and of body markers. And they used, especially in the more advanced slave systems, the sacred symbols of religion

A better definition would thus be “. . . the permanent violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons” Patterson notes the frequency of linguistic systems that use the same

word for “foreigner” as “slave,” which accords with the idea of alienation. “Natal alienation,” a term often used by Patterson, refers to the ritual social death of the slave. The achievement of this state of natal alienation can be accomplished through many different ritualized ceremonies. The slave may, for example, “eat” his old identity through a food ceremony, or have his name changed.

Hence, according to Patterson’s analysis, slavery is, in essence, removal of identity and “social death.” Therefore, the reconstruction and resistance of an ethnic group can be seen as a potential response to just such a threat of social death.

Once we consider many of the techniques of slavery, and particularly the significance of the symbolization of domination that make up the symbols of social death, then the modern reader of the Bible is prepared for the significance of the symbols of alienation that were associated with Neo-Babylonian rule. For example, even though the stories of Daniel and his friends come from a late era in their final form, the symbol of name changing is an important fact of their association with the Babylonian court, and may not be an incidental detail. Furthermore, Nebuchadnezzar also changed the name of Zedekiah when he placed him on the throne of Judah in Jehoiachin’s absence (2 Kings 24:17).

I do not argue that the Jews were slaves in Babylonia according to all the definitions of Patterson. But the dismissive statement that the Jews were *not* slaves can be a hasty generalization, depending on the type, or characteristics, of slavery that are suggested by the term “slave.” Indeed, we have important hints that the exiles did face symbolic aspects of slavery in Patterson’s sense, and this insight must inform our view of the social conditions of the Exile. The symbols of power and conquest form the main emphasis of Patterson’s analysis, and we must be aware of the possible consciousness of these symbols in the Exilic literature of the Old Testament. Seen in this light, the policy of name changing, and constant reassurances by the Prophets that it was Yahweh who willed the exile, and not the power of foreign gods, both seem to reflect an awareness of the symbols of power that the Exiles had to live with, and struggle against. Slavery is a point on a “scale of domination.” The Babylonian exiles may not have been “slaves,” but evidence suggests they were most assuredly on this “scale.” Finally, even under the rule of the supposedly tolerant Persians, Ezra mentions in his prayer to God (Ezra 9) that “we are slaves”!

TOWARD AN EXILIC THEOLOGY

What, then, does it mean to say that the Bible is a product of the Exile? At first, it means that modern readers of the Bible must confront, accept, and then listen to the social experiences of the writers of our Bible. Certainly we have kept the Bible as our foundational document because we have found that the experiences related to us from the ancient Israelites, the apostles, and the editors of these works, are of primary importance in helping us to understand our experiences.

But how does our knowledge of the *social* and *political circumstances* of the writers of the Bible change our perception and understanding of the *religious* and *ethical* message of the Bible? Is it significant that our “primary document,” a book we call “Holy Scripture,” is a product of an oppressed and occupied minority? Indeed it is. We understand the passages of God’s miraculous warfare against Israel’s enemies to be the religion of the oppressed who hope for vengeance against the perpetrators of injustice! The destruction of Pharaoh’s armies at the crossing of the Red Sea, for example. We know that the more fantastic elements of this story were added (by the Priestly Writers) at the time of the exile, thus assuring the exiles of God’s power over enemies, while perhaps succumbing a bit to Ancient Israelite resentment of their treatment by the “Pharaohs” of all the Empires who conquered their homeland. We know, for example, that some of the Joseph stories were rewritten at this time (thus explaining the resemblance between some of the Joseph stories with the stories of Daniel 1–6, or Esther), to show that Hebrews can be clever and more successful than the locals at running their own government!

What this means is that when we consider the experiences of refugees from modern warfare; or deported minorities in the United States or Soviet Union; or the injustices against indigenous populations like the Native Americans, the Australian Aboriginal People, the Native Tibetans, the Sami; all of these social situations come much closer to the circumstances of the writing, reading, and praying of the biblical writers. Indeed, there was a time when Quakers understood this rather better than they do in the post-Industrial Revolution age when the Meeting House grew closer in its ties to the “Counting House.” As a persecuted reform movement, the early Friends knew a time of needing to care for their imprisoned and

persecuted brothers and sisters. Perhaps they, too, understood not only the Bible, but their own Quakerism, in a manner that is difficult in the white, upper-class churches of Orange County, California, but easier in Kaimosi, Kenya, La Paz, Bolivia, or among the Inuit of Alaska. It is a sobering thought for modern Quakers that in the eyes of their own spiritual founders, they seem more like the Babylonians than the exiles. Therefore, it remains to ask what sort of biblical theology can Babylonians have?

THE THEOLOGY OF EXILE FOR BABYLONIANS

As white American Christians, we can only begin to do theology based on the Bible when we awaken to the fact that from the perspective of most of the world's population, *we* are the Babylonians and the Romans, and *they* are the exiled Jews or the oppressed early church. Is our preaching, our missionary work, our evangelism, alive to this reality? If it is not, then our message is merely a “clanging symbol.”

To choose one example to illustrate, if Quaker preaching in Bolivia is not informed by the social, political, and economic disenfranchisement of the Aymara people, then we are the Babylonians (pious ones, to be sure, but still Babylonian!). Have we heard voices like the Aymara teacher Julio Tumiri Apaza? He writes:

We are aware of the racial segregation to which Indians are subjected by the “cholos” (westerners); the degrading exploitation resulting from the mining and feudal system and economic dependence; poverty and hunger; malnutrition and death; public institutions and science serving the dual system; discrimination and alienation in the education system . . . in other words, a deliberate rejection of the ancestral culture of the Indians and an unconditional submission to Western culture . . . all of these factors have thwarted the development of our personality as a respectable people within the community of the nations of the world.¹⁴

Or have we listened to voices like the Aymara historian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who documents the struggle of the Aymara people for political rights and cultural recognition in Bolivia, in “Aymara Past, Aymara Future”?¹⁵ Cusicanqui writes:

Today, as in the past, indigenous movements demand a radical restructuring of society. Indian autonomy (territorial, social,

cultural, linguistic and political) is the starting point for building a new egalitarian, multi-ethnic nation. These ideas were present in the struggles of Manqu Inka in 1536 and both Amaru and Katari in 1780. But, as in the past, indigenous struggles today clash head on with tenacious colonial structures that condemn Indians to a fate of punishment and mutilation.

Until such perspectives from the “exiles” become a part of our Christian theology then we haven't understood the meaning of the biblical Exile, and even more seriously, we haven't heard the Bible speaking from its origins. If we dismiss such considerations as “politics” and somehow “different from the Gospel,” then we take our places as welcomed patriotic citizens in the throne rooms of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, and the chapel of the Pentagon.

There are models, of course, of faithfulness in the midst of the Babylonians or Persians or Egyptians. Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Joseph, and Moses—but are we prepared for the “Exilic” theology of resistance, civil disobedience, and radical faithfulness that informed these biblical heroes? Or will we continue the much more docile and naive theology of “winning souls for heaven” while allowing Nebuchadnezzar, Caesar, and Pharaoh to dictate our concept of life on this earth?

NOTES

1. Throughout this essay, I use the convention “B.C.E.” to refer to the time before the common era of Judaism and Christianity, and I will refer to the “Hebrew Bible” rather than the Christian convention of “The Old Testament.”
2. On the biblical events, consult the standard histories, such as: S. Herrmann, *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981) (Revised) Tran. J. Bowden; J. Bright, *A History of Israel* 3rd Ed.; J. Soggin, *A History of Israel* (London, 1984), B. Oded, “Judah and the Exile,” *Israelite and Judean History*, Ed. Hayes and Miller (London, SCM Press, 1977); G. R. Berry, “The Unrealistic Attitude of PostExilic Judaism,” *JBL* 64(1945); “The Old Testament Historiography of the Exilic Period,” *Studia Theologica* 33(1979) pp. 45-67; Ackroyd, Peter, *Exile and Restoration* (London, 1968).
3. See p. 289, Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* 2nd Ed. (London, 1960), and Ginsberg, H. L., “Judah and the Transjordan States from 734 to 571 BCE,” *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, N.T. 1950.
4. Otzen, Benedict, “Israel Under the Assyrians,” *Mesopotamia* No. 7, “Power and Propaganda,” ed. Larson (Copenhagen, 1979).
5. See “Vinedressers and Plowmen” 2 Kings 25:12 and Jer. 52:16, J. N. Graham, *Biblical Archaeologist* March 1984.
6. See my book, *The Religion of the Landless* (New York, Meyer-Stone [Crossroads], 1989).
7. Larson, *ibid.*

8. For the debate on whether religious oppression was included in Assyrian practice toward conquered territories, see Cogan, M., *Imperialism and Religion* (Chico, Ca., Scholars Press, 1974); McKay, John, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians* SBT 26 (London, 1973), and Spieckermann, Jermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* (Göttingen, 1982).
9. Oded, Bustenay, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, (Wiesbaden, 1979). Note Tadmor's warning, "The Assyrian Royal inscriptions, being by their very nature official documents of self-praise, demand from the historian a judicious critical approach," p. 13, H. Tadmor, "History and Ideology in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions," *Orientalis Antiqui Collectio XVII*, Roma 1981.
10. On estimates of the numbers, see Wurz, Heinrich, "Die Wegführung der Juden durch König Nebukadnezar II," Th.D. Dissertation, Wein, 1958 (Unpublished): Isa. 40:9; 44:26; Jer. 4:16; 9:10; 25:18; Zech. 1:12; Neh. 8:15, "cities of Judah" Jer. 7:17; 34:11; 6:13, etc. Albright, quoted in Weinberg, p. 79, "Post-Exilic Palestine; An Archaeological Report," Saul S. Weinberg, *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities* IV, 1971, p. 78ff.
11. K. Galling, *Studien zur Geschichte Israels im Persischen Zeitalter*, (Tübingen, 1964).
12. P. 209, Kopytoff, Igor, "Slavery," in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Ed. Beals, Spiegal and Tyler (Palo Alto, Ca., 1982).
13. Patterson, Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Ma., 1982.)
14. P. 3, *The Indian Liberation and Social Rights Movement in Bolivia* (Copenhagen, IWGIA Documents, 1978).
15. In *Report on the Americas*, Vol. 25, Number 3, Dec. 1991, pp. 18-23.