

September 18, 2022

The Bible Story Journey: The Crucible of Exile

Psalms 137, 126; Ezra 1

Our scripture today comes from the darkness of the Babylonian exile, a song of angry and miserable captives. We read all of Psalm 137:

- ¹ *By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*
- ² *On the willows there
we hung up our harps.*
- ³ *For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*
- ⁴ *How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?*
- ⁵ *If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!*
- ⁶ *Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.*
- ⁷ *Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'*
- ⁸ *O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!*
- ⁹ *Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!*

Let me bring you back to where we left off in our telling of the Bible story. The armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured the city of Jerusalem and took the educated and artisan classes into exile in Babylon, leaving only peasants and a few token leaders in the city. For those exiles, being torn from their home was wrenching, of course, but they had hope. Empires come and go, but they knew that Jerusalem and God's temple were eternal. They dreamed of the day when they would be able to return to the city they loved. Two prophets of God – Jeremiah, in Jerusalem, and Ezekiel, in Babylon – warned their audiences that worse was coming to Jerusalem, but their voices were drowned out by a host of other prophets who were promising a swift return for the exiles and a restoration of all the treasures that Babylon had confiscated. These hopeful prophets were wrong. The puppet king that Nebuchadnezzar had set up in Jerusalem made an alliance with Egypt, so the Babylonian armies swept down on Israel,

determined to finish the job this time. They did. Assisted by the nation of Edom, which had a long-standing grudge against Israel, they left Jerusalem and the temple a smoking ruin.

When word of the destruction came to the exiles, they were stunned. Their faith in God had been inseparable from the temple and the sacrifices there. Without those physical and ritual structures, they didn't even know who God was. The depths of their depression and fury are searingly captured by the psalm we just read: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? I will never forget you, Jerusalem! Nor will I ever forget you, Edom, or you, Babylon!" Thus, swinging erratically between heartbreaking grief and vows of bloodthirsty revenge, exiled Israel found itself without a home, without a hope.

But sometimes the homeland looms larger for those who are separated from it. I was never more uncritically patriotic than I was when I lived overseas. And sometimes an immigrant community, far from their land of origin, cares for their country's traditions more than anyone. Here in the Upper Midwest, our many Norwegian immigrant communities have carefully preserved the practice of pickling fish in lye to make lutefisk, using recipes developed centuries ago in Norway to preserve food. Norwegian Lutheran churches still have lutefisk dinners all over Minnesota and Wisconsin. Meanwhile, I've heard, people in Norway have largely stopped eating the vile stuff because they have refrigerators now. Something like that began to happen to the Judean exiles. Having lost all that they had once held as central to their faith, they began to ask themselves, "What do we have left to hold on to?"

And one thing that they had was books. The temple had always contained scrolls of ancient writings, some of them recording the Law of Moses, and others written long after that time, but the books had never figured very large in their practice of faith. The people's religion had been all about taking sacrifices to the temple on feast days, watching the priests perform the rituals while the Levites sang sacred songs and prayers. But, apparently, when they were dragged off into exile many of them grabbed whatever they could carry, and that included the scrolls. The exiles began opening the old books, reading them, copying them, and sharing them.

Some of the books were fragmentary, and others seemed to tell the same stories, but in different ways. A new class of religious leader began to be recognized – the bookmen, or scribes. Some of these scribes began weaving the different fragments of scrolls together, like pieces of a puzzle, and combining the varying versions of a story into single accounts. For instance, the words that we have from the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied during the Assyrian Empire, include several passages foretelling the downfall of the emperor of Babylon. Did Isaiah write those? They would have made no sense to his own audience, because there was no emperor of Babylon then. Or did someone from the exile compile Isaiah's old prophecies and insert a few new ones? Even the great historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings appear to have been put together by a scribal editor during the Babylonian exile. Why do I say that? Well, because that's where that history ends: in the middle of the exile.

In short, the tragedy and hardship of exile led to an incredible burst of literary activity. Most of the books of the Old Testament were shaped into their current forms during that time. Destruction led to fertility and creativity, and the people of Israel became for the first time truly the "People of the Book." They did it at first perhaps because it was all they had, but it took.

But a book isn't a faith. You still need to worship, but without a temple, how? And so people began to gather, first I imagine in homes, but then in small community buildings. They

gathered and read aloud from the books. And then sang some of the songs of the temple – the psalms. That used to be the job of the Levites, but if there wasn't a Levite handy, they made do. Everyone learned the psalms. They called these gatherings, "the *qahal*," which is Hebrew for "the Gathering." Later, *qahal* was translated into Greek: *synagogue*.

This Gathering was a smaller and much simpler affair than a temple festival, so the exiles could meet weekly, specifically on the Sabbath. Now the rule to rest on the seventh day, the Sabbath, was an ancient one – one of the big ten, in fact – but it is curious that in the writings that survive from before the exile, there's almost no mention of the Sabbath. Like some of the other laws – like the one about no graven images – it was locked up in a scroll cabinet in the temple and not a part of everyday life. But *after* the exile? Holy cow, Sabbath was everything! The same thing happened with the laws of kosher, all those rules about which animals are clean or unclean to eat. Not such a big deal before the exile; *very* big deal afterwards. Ditto for circumcision. It seems that the Judean exiles, living precariously in a foreign land, careful not to offend their Babylonian rulers, hunted through the Law of Moses for ways that they could quietly maintain their identity without drawing too much attention to themselves. Before the exile, their religious identity had been centered on Solomon's temple and the sacrifices there – partaken of by most Israelites no more than three or four times a year, at the great festivals. But after the exile, their religious identity was centered on personal behavior and faithful observance, day by day, Sabbath by Sabbath. To me, that feels like a healthy development.

Then, maybe fifty years into the exile, a new prophet arose from the Judean exile community, proclaiming a message of hope. We don't know this prophet's name, but his words are preserved in the book of Isaiah, starting with chapter 40. It has been suggested, in fact, that this prophet was also the one who compiled the first thirty-nine chapters of that book, preserving the two-hundred year old words of Isaiah of Jerusalem for the future. Either way, this Prophet of the Exile declared that salvation was coming to Israel. You think the Exodus from Egypt was something? Watch. God's going to do a new thing. Israel will return to its land. Jerusalem will be rebuilt.

But this prophet went beyond that. He went on to say that God was more than Israel had realized. God wasn't just Israel's god but was the *only* God. This was new. The first of the ten commandments says, "You shall have no other gods before me," but if you think about it, that doesn't necessarily mean that there *are* no other gods, just that Israel's God comes first. This prophet went further. Israel's God is the world's God, and the reason that God chose Israel is not because Israel's so special, but so that Israel could be a light to all the nations, showing who God really is. Because Israel had that task, God was not giving up on them, but had anointed a savior for the people: Cyrus the Persian, who would set them free from bondage.

Now this must have been puzzling to the Judean exiles. They would have heard of Cyrus, probably. He was the leader of a nation northeast of Babylon, which had made an alliance with the nation of the Medes, but what could two uncivilized mountain kingdoms do to the richest and wealthiest empire on earth? Here's what they did: Cyrus the Persian led his Medo-Persian armies into the heart of Babylon and captured it swiftly and convincingly. You see, while Babylon still looked impressive, in the half century since Nebuchadnezzar had conquered most of the known world, Babylon had degenerated into a corrupt and petty kingdom, known more for its orgies than its armies. On October 29, 539 BCE, the people of Babylon threw open the gates of their capital city and gratefully welcomed their conqueror. The Empire of Babylon was no more; it

was the Persian Empire now. Then the new Emperor Cyrus looked around his conquered lands and said, “What are all these foreign villages doing here?”

“Oh, those are exiles from the lands that Nebuchadnezzar conquered.”

“Why?”

“Well, they’re like hostages.”

“Why would I want hostages? What a pointless nuisance.” And so Cyrus issued a decree that all the captives of Babylon who wanted to return to their homelands were free to go. He would even pay their travel expenses.

The exile was over. The captive Israelites were free.

We started this story with the grief and violent anger of Psalm 137. Let us conclude with another psalm, Psalm 126:

*¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*

*² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
‘The Lord has done great things for them.’*

*³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

*⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

*⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.*

*⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

Final word: When I do these story sermons, I usually use this time at the end to highlight some practical lessons for us today, but today I don’t know what to say. If I knew of a contemporary religion that was in the process of losing its former, beloved form, or I might encourage it to be faithful and creative and perhaps invent something new. Instead of raging in anger at what has been lost, they might rejoice the salvation to come, because God is faithful. Or something like that.