



Reimagining today's church

Paul Bradbury

**HOME BY
ANOTHER
ROUTE**

'Inspiring and challenging'

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 631 0

First published 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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Cover image © harbourviewphotography.com

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Introduction: 'Crisis? What crisis?'

Not far from where I live, on Dorset's Jurassic coast, is the village and bay of Kimmeridge. Overlooking the bay is Clavell Tower, a striking eleven-metre-high building, which sits close to the edge of the dramatic cliff that forms one side of the entrance to the bay. Clavell Tower has had an interesting life. Built by the local vicar as an observatory and folly in 1830, it was later used as a lookout by the coastguard until the 1930s. Having been gutted by fire, it stood unattended for years, its desolate appearance and location the inspiration for a crime novel, *The Black Tower* by P.D. James, in 1975. More recently, however, its fortunes have improved. Threatened by accelerated erosion of the cliff on which it stands, the decision was made to move the entire tower inland. The tower was dismantled piece by piece, each of its nearly 16,000 stones was numbered and catalogued, and then the whole thing reconstructed and renovated 25 metres away from the cliff. The tower's previous position is now remembered by a ring of foundation stones close to the encroaching cliff edge.

Clavell Tower is quite a feat of restoration. Returning the tower to its former glory, and raising the money for the work and materials, was one thing. But responding to the imminent crisis created by the power of the sea was another challenge entirely. It is a testimony to the value and importance we place on these historic buildings and landmarks that those involved had the vision and commitment to save such a beautiful building.

Yet – you can't help wondering how many years 25 metres amounts to. There are large, global forces at work here. The cliff continues to

crumble at an alarming rate; at times, whole slices, a metre deep or more, disappear during winter storms. The coast path in the area requires rerouting in various places to respond to the landslides that are occurring now with regularity. Clavell Tower may have been restored to its former glory, but the crisis has not been averted. As things stand, Clavell Tower has simply been given a stay of execution. There is no more cliff to play with. One day, the tower and all its 16,000 stones will fall into the sea.

The church in the west faces a crisis, one created by a force of increasing intensity, unleashed in the deep sea of the Enlightenment era, whose eroding forces are at work at the very foundation on which the church as we know it stands. We touch on the reality of this crisis with talk of church renewal, church reform, church growth, of which there is much debate, much advice, much time and money invested. Yet how much of this effort ignores, consciously or not, the deeper forces at work at the bottom of the cliff we find ourselves on? How much of our attention is spent on restoring the building at all costs, without fully embracing the true reality of the environment in which that project is taking place? And how much of the effort involved under these headlines is made in the cause of simply moving the church inland, restoring the historic structure of the building away from danger and giving it a new lease of life. Crisis? What crisis?

Crisis is the very real and unavoidable context of the exile and the literature inspired by it. Israel's life had been destroyed, its structures and symbols literally burned by fire and its elite exported miles across the desert to Babylon. The Babylonian empire was now the pre-eminent force in the Near-Eastern world. It had been unleashing its power on the surrounding empires for decades, eating up territory, getting inevitably closer. It was surely only a matter of time until Jerusalem fell.

Yet, as the Babylonians withdrew from the charred wreck of Jerusalem, taking the ruling figures with them and leaving the poor

to work the land under an appointed administrator, there were those who believed that all could be restored. There was a way back. The stones of Jerusalem could be numbered and catalogued and, one day, they would return and all would be back to the way things were. Crisis? What crisis?

One of the exilic writers in particular experienced almost all the horror of the exile first-hand. He grew up in Jerusalem and was a resident there when the first wave of exiles was taken to Babylon. He travelled as a captive across the desert to Babylon and, with his fellow exiles, began to learn how to live as an exiled people, while at the same time wondering what had happened to their home and whether they would ever see it again. That writer and prophet was Ezekiel. Among the vivid visions and prophetic actions of the book of Ezekiel is that of the valley of dry bones. The hand of the Lord takes Ezekiel and presents him with a vision of utter hopelessness and death. There is a valley 'full of bones' in which the Spirit leads Ezekiel 'back and forth among them' as though confronting him with the unyielding detail of his own despair. Having confronted Ezekiel with the pain and reality of the crisis of the exile, the Spirit asks Ezekiel a key question: 'Son of man, can these bones live?'

That question appears to have a simple answer, for the ground beneath the valley of dry bones is the ground of a foreign power. It is the ground of a foreign empire, one that worships foreign gods and one that has triumphed over the God of Israel. Ezekiel lived and exercised his ministry through the anticipation and realisation of the catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem. What Ezekiel saw in the vision of the dry bones is what he had experienced: a stark and potent vision of the reality of exile, an exile that was viewed as utter death and destruction to all that seemed to Israel as fundamental to its identity and purpose.

For the western church, the ground beneath our feet has shifted. We describe this movement in a variety of ways: post-modern, post-Christendom, post-Christian. And in these descriptions, we point

to the seismic nature of the movement we experience. Something fundamental is taking place and has taken place. Old landmarks, symbols and structures that could once be used reliably to orient our lives, our institutions, our faith, seem to have shifted or gone altogether. In this sense, we experience what Ezekiel and the captives in Babylon experienced; we experience exile.

Metaphors are a way of interpreting and reflecting on our own story and situation by laying alongside it the images and stories of another. The world of the metaphor connects at different points with the world we experience. We see connections and illuminations, as well as differences and mismatches. The more connections, the better the metaphor. Yet all metaphors have limitations. They cannot fully describe our reality, but they can help us understand it and respond to it more confidently.

I believe exile is a powerful metaphor for the church, particularly the western church, and perhaps even more particularly the church in the UK. We have not suffered the geographical dislocation that was the experience of the Babylonian captives, or which is the painful experience of many political dissidents or asylum seekers. So, while we must recognise the dangers of associating too closely with the emotions of exile, nevertheless we may well connect with a 'sense of the loss of a structured, reliable "world" where treasured symbols of meaning are mocked and dismissed'.¹ Others have explored the richness of this metaphor and argued its merits and deficiencies. That is not the main aim of this book. But a summary of our own experience of exile might be offered under two broad headings: disestablishment and decentring.

Disestablishment, though not yet a constitutional reality in the UK, is nevertheless a description of an ongoing process whereby the Christian church is increasingly losing power and influence in society. Remnants of another era still remain – civic churches, the Lord Spiritual, families coming for baptism, a chaplain to the Houses of Parliament, prayers at the start of local council meetings –

but these are remnants, often under threat or in decline. They are vestiges of the once-great edifice of Christendom, the constituted marriage between church and state which provided a place at the high table of power and influence for the church from Constantine in the fourth century onwards.

Christianity was the shaping story, the lingua franca, the DNA of social, cultural and political life for centuries. Now, it seems like an obscure myth in an old language that no one speaks any more. Many commentators and scholars will point to the Enlightenment and the philosophy of René Descartes, John Locke, Rousseau and others in the 17th century as opening the door to a fundamental undermining of the whole Christendom monolith. This 'age of reason' challenged the assumptions of Christendom at its very core with its assertion that knowledge can only be reliably attained by the reasoning individual. As this assertion worked its way into every area of life, the power and influence of the church as the arbiter of truth was subsequently diminished. Religion, not just Christianity, has been constantly re-evaluated since and seen its stock devalued. It has been told to retreat into the private sphere and stay out of public life. Its long and inauspicious association with political power and cultural hegemony has left it with a reputation it struggles to overcome. Consequently, religion in general, and the Christian church in particular, 'must now function within a framework that precludes any kind of cultural authority'.²

Decentring is a word that more describes the consequences of disestablishment. At one time, the church and the Christian faith it represented could count on a recognition and reputation within the life of western societies that made it central to people's lives whether they were believers or not. This is clearly no longer the case. Furthermore, it is precisely its perceived abuse of its position of power and authority, as part of the establishment, that puts it in a poor position now to provide any influence or make its voice heard. In that sense, many would say that the church is a church on the edge. That may well be our experience.

But while the church has been pushed from the centre, society has also lost any real sense of having a centre at all. It is not as straightforward as to say that the church has been thrust from the centre of cultural life and replaced with something else. In such a scenario, at least the church could come to terms with its new position and begin to reorient itself. Instead, there is no centre any more, or at least no communally agreed centre around which spiritual, cultural and political life can be oriented. Instead, 'culture is now an organised diversity with little sense of a defining centre'.³

In this context, the search for new models, new paradigms in which to organise and plan might well be futile. These sorts of approaches reckon on the emergence of a new status quo, a new kind of place, a new set of established relationships which remain dependable and predictable. But the nature of our new context is one of continuous change. In fact, perhaps the one predictable thing we experience is change itself.

So how might the church go about even asking the questions of its place and identity in this bewildering, challenging, disorienting context? The very unpredictability of the world we now inhabit mitigates against the standard methods of analysis. We cannot see our evolving context as a new system to analyse and understand so that we can put it together again in our minds and work out our place within it. There is no system. There is no place. Exploring who we are, and how we are to be in this new world, will require a very different mode of reflection.

Narrative resources offer us such an alternative mode of thinking. Sociologists now speak of 'flows' of images, data and capital as a way of making sense of culture and of describing cultural change. Culture is no longer static and definable, but its constant change is a layering of narratives within an environment of 'flows'. These flows are influences, pressures, incentives that shape and develop the stories of our lives and the lives of those around us. And so, when we are asked about ourselves, we invariably tell a story. We are telling

our own particular narrative of identity within the multiple, layered narratives of those we live among. Of course, there are groups of narratives, networks of narratives, many ways in which narratives connect with one another. Where there is significant commonality, we might call this a culture. But even as we have placed the finger of definition on a story, the story starts to move on. Stories allow for change, for flow. They are, by their nature, averse to formulaism.

Perhaps, then, the most fruitful way to explore our place as the church in the maelstrom of our world is to play with story. What are the stories that connect best with the story we find ourselves in? A story is not like a map or a model. It will not lay itself over our half-formed version of events and tell us how things are, how things will be and therefore what we should do about it. But a good story will lie alongside the emerging story we find ourselves in and will act rather like a spiritual director. It will ask good questions, perhaps difficult questions. It will listen, probe, offer insight. It will gently but insistently force us to listen to ourselves, mine the truth from within ourselves and help move our story on. That is what I intend to try and do with the story of the exile.

The exile is, of course, a big story, told in numerous ways from various perspectives in the Bible. So, to make the task more manageable, I am using the vignette of Ezekiel's vision in the valley of dry bones as a window on the whole story. Ezekiel 37:1–14 is a concentrated image of exile, a story within a story, a prophetically symbolic acting-out of the story that has been and the *story that will unfold*.

That latter element makes it particularly rich for us. For not only does it detail the reality of exile, but it provides the hope of continuity and the trajectory of the future. And that future, in this vision and in other places in the exilic literature, employs another metaphor: the metaphor of home, or perhaps more accurately *homecoming*. 'I will settle you in your own land' (v. 14), says the Lord at the conclusion of the vision. There will be a homecoming; that is the promise.

Homecoming therefore provides a key connecting point in the overlaying of the world of exile with the world of our own crisis as the church in the secular west. Homecoming is there among the language of renewal and reform, in the literature and conference addresses on church growth. We may dress it up all we want, but really, as a church, we long for home in one way or another. We hope for an end to the disorienting experience of uncertainty and alienation in our own culture and search for a new kind of stability of identity and significance that feels like home. To start out on that journey may well be to glance over our shoulder to some vision of a remembered or imagined past, or it may be to venture boldly towards a vision of the future. Either way, it is a journey inspired by some concept of what it means for the church to come home.

However, as the title of this book implies, the kind of homecoming Israel may well have expected was not the kind of homecoming that transpired – and it was not, I believe, the kind of homecoming envisioned by God in the valley of dry bones. Exile was a point of departure for Israel in more ways than one, for it invoked a period of enormous creativity and reimagination in their communal life as the people of God. Israel did not simply number the stones of Jerusalem, return them on the basis of an established plan and rebuild. They did not simply return to the old ways with the crisis horizon moved far enough away for normal service to resume for a period of time. What Israel was invited to explore through the exile was more than restoration, or even reform and renewal – what they were invited to journey in was resurrection. Homecoming was promised, but in a way they could never have imagined or planned. This was homecoming, but by another route.

1

Exile: a story for our times

On Reading station

I was recently at Reading station with a few spare minutes and found myself standing next to a memorial plaque on the wall. The memorial is to a Henry West who, it says, 'lost his life to a whirlwind at the Great Western Railway Station, Reading, on 24 March 1840'. The final words of the memorial, a poem, refer to poor Henry West's quick and untimely death and then conclude thus:

*Yet hushed be all complaint,
'tis sweet, 'tis blest,
to change Earth's stormy scenes
for endless rest.
Dear friends prepare,
take warning by my fall,
so you shall hear with joy
your Saviour's call.*

This insight into 19th-century life, hidden in a quiet corner of a busy and modernised station that bears little if any resemblance to that within which the unfortunate Henry West lost his life, struck me as a poignant symbol of so much that has changed in the spiritual landscape of Britain since the whirlwind of 1840. It cannot possibly be said that the whirlwind-like events of our own era, which take too many lives with similar suddenness, could receive such a certain and hopeful response and in such a public form.

The Reading station memorial's words of comfort, warning and salvation remind us of a very different world where the language and assumptions of the Christian faith could confidently be recalled in the face of public tragedy. That world has surely been lost. The church may still be called upon to respond to tragedy. That was the case that same week I stood by the Reading station memorial in the aftermath of a terrorist attack in Manchester, only a few days before another terrorist attack in London and a few more before the Grenfell Tower fire in north Kensington. But it responds from a very different position. The Bishop of Manchester, who was a key figure in the city of Manchester's response to the terrorist attack there, later described his role as 'curating' the space in which people of many faiths and none could grieve and come to terms with what had happened in their city. One could only imagine what the response might be if a church leader had repeated the words for Henry West on such an occasion.

Standing next to Henry West's memorial, as the world hurried past on its urgent business, was a moment where I was struck by the force of change that has taken place in our country – and in particular by the sense of disconnection between a picture of the world painted by those words and the world I inhabit. I keenly felt my own disconnect, my own disorientation in a world that holds few if any of the certainties and convictions that enabled the Christian community to speak so plainly about faith and salvation. In such a world, there is no consensus about the narrative that shapes our response to tragedy and death. I felt alienated. I understood and appreciated the language of the memorial even while I recognised how it jarred with the world around me. The poem spoke to me of a world I connect with personally, yet a world that in any communal sense has utterly disappeared. For an instant, I felt the force of what it is to be an exile.

Israel's story of exile

The story of Israel's exile is well documented in the historical books of the Old Testament. There also emerges, around the historical record, a host of literature that reflects and wrestles with the experience and impact of what had happened.

The seeds of exile are sown when the kingdom of David and Solomon falls apart following the succession of Rehoboam to the throne. Jeroboam leads a rebellion which leads to the division of the kingdom into the northern kingdom of Israel and southern Judah (1 Kings 12).

Jeroboam's behaviour becomes a watchword for subsequent kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. Many of the kings of Israel that follow are judged by the history writers to have 'followed the ways of Jeroboam' (1 Kings 15:34; 16:19; 22:52), as though his act of intrigue and rebellion set the tone for the future of the breakaway kingdom.

A geopolitical reading of the story sees a small and vulnerable kingdom weakened significantly by the division into two. The two nations sit at a strategic location between a number of larger opposing empires whose own dominance rises and falls. There is Egypt to the south, Assyria to the north and, later, a resurgent Babylon to the east. The land of Israel is fertile and of strategic significance to all of them and it is not long before the two states become party to the attentions of these superpowers.

Fortunes fluctuate for northern Israel until the land is exiled by the Assyrians in 722BC, at the end of the reign of Hoshea. Israel by then is betting one superpower against another in terms of which can provide it protection. It is officially a protectorate of Assyria but Hoshea decides to defect to Egypt, with disastrous consequences (2 Kings 17:3-6). The population is deported to Assyria and the land repopulated with people from outside Israel (2 Kings 17:24).

Assyria then turns its attention to the southern kingdom of Judah. Sennacherib lays siege to Jerusalem but the city is delivered. However, a new power is emerging and starting to gain influence. King Hezekiah receives envoys from Babylon and shows them the riches of the palace vaults. He seems to think their visit trivial, brushing them off as people 'from a distant land' (2 Kings 20:12–14). But Babylon swiftly emerges as the dominant power in the region. The battle of Megiddo appeared to have established Egypt over its rival Assyria as the superpower of the region, with Judah paying it tribute. But Babylon invades Judah with such force that the Egyptian threat comes to abrupt end (2 Kings 24:7).

While the story of exile is the story of both Israel and Judah, the significance of the story really resides in the fate of Judah; for it is Jerusalem that signifies and symbolises the identity and destiny of the people of God. The first exile of Judah in 597BC, following the surrender of King Jehoiachin, sees the king, his family, officials and staff exiled to Babylon and another king, Zedekiah, appointed in his stead. However, when Zedekiah rebels nine years later, the response is ruthless. The Babylonians, under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, lay siege to Jerusalem in 587BC and then, when the city is eventually breached, it is set on fire. 'Every important building he burned down', the writer of Kings tells us (2 Kings 25:9), including the royal palace and the temple. The king is removed in shackles to Babylon with his eyes gouged out, having also witnessed the murder of his own sons (Jeremiah 52:10–11). Another puppet-king is put in his place. While 2 Kings appears to end on a note of cautious optimism with the arrival of a successor to Nebuchadnezzar, it cannot wipe out the depressing end to the book which says that 'all the people from the least to the greatest, together with the army officers, fled to Egypt for fear of the Babylonians' (2 Kings 25:26).

Trying to ascertain accurate figures for the number of people exiled is difficult. 2 Kings 24:14 gives a figure for the first exile event of 10,000 and also includes 7,000 fighting men and 1,000 artisans (2 Kings 24:16), thus making a figure of 18,000. Jeremiah gives a smaller

figure of 4,600 for the total carried off to Babylon in three separate events (Jeremiah 52:28–30). Rationalising these disparate figures may well be done by assuming that the Jeremiah figures only refer to men; including their families as well could give a far larger figure. These passages also make it clear that it was the ruling, military and artisan classes that were taken into captivity in a clear attempt to emasculate Judah as a viable state. There were citizens of Judah left in Jerusalem and the surrounding villages, but they were poor peasants, left only so that the land could continue to be cultivated (2 Kings 25:12).

There is little disputing that this is what happened to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The Old Testament biblical records of the events of the period are substantial. The landscape of the gospels, 400 or so years later, is one shaped by these events. Northern Israel's earlier exile and the repopulation of the land (Samaria) with foreigners is the backstory to the enormous prejudice shown to Samaritans in stories such as the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and in the encounter between Jesus and the woman the well (John 4:4–26). While the temple had been rebuilt by the time of Jesus, Jerusalem and the land remained under the jurisdiction of a foreign pagan power and had been so since the exile. The post-exilic stories of Ezra and Nehemiah, the rebuilding of the walls, are stories of great hope, stories that rekindle confidence in the covenant between God and Israel. Yet the exile remains definitive and the sense of the loss of Jerusalem and all that it represents profound and persistent. From that point on, the hope of restoration is at the forefront of the consciousness of Israel. To all intents and purposes, the exile is ongoing when Jesus emerges on the scene and the messianic hope and expectancy that greets him is a clear symptom of that.

The experience of exile

But what did it mean to experience exile? The biblical accounts clearly describe a disaster of enormous proportions for the people of

Israel. The siege of the city in 587BC was so severe that famine ensued (Jeremiah 52:6). When the city's walls are breached and the city is set on fire, the destruction is brutal and the loss of life considerable. Jerusalem is reduced to rubble (Psalm 79:1) and bodies litter the streets, attracting vultures and other scavengers (Psalm 79:2).

The book of Lamentations gives similar insights into the experience of the destruction of the city. Before the breaching of the walls, it describes the famine that had taken hold, leaving people to search desperately for food (1:11, 19). Lamentations details the effects of hunger and malnutrition (2:12; 4:8) and of people resorting to cannibalism to survive (2:20; 4:10). The destruction of the city appears to be near total (2:2) with the fire having consumed everything (2:3). The walls of the city have been flattened (2:8) and all the gates broken and destroyed (2:9). The city was abandoned (1:1) and dead bodies lay unburied in the streets (2:21). Survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem flee into the desert where they are vulnerable to the violence of bandits (5:9) and rape (5:11). The picture that the exilic books – some historical (2 Chronicles, 2 Kings), others prophetic (Ezekiel, Jeremiah) and poetic (Lamentations, Psalms) – build is one of a brutalised and traumatised people whose experience of violence and death is the dark background to all exilic and post-exilic literature.

There is, however, a more recent body of opinion that would play down the experience of exile. The argument is based in part on the lack of evidence for ongoing suffering, slavery or persecution of either those left behind in Judea or those deported to Babylon. It also draws on a critical interpretation of writers such as that of Chronicles who seems to overplay the impact of the destruction of Jerusalem by describing the land as virtually empty (2 Chronicles 36:16–21). There is growing evidence, however, to suggest that those who continued to live in Jerusalem were experiencing great suffering and that there was large-scale destruction and depopulation of Judean villages in the area. Archaeological evidence now suggests that those living in Jerusalem lived as not much more than squatters and that this

situation changed very little until the arrival of Nehemiah in 445BC.⁴ Research data also suggests that 80 per cent of population centres were abandoned or destroyed in that period.⁵ One summary of the evidence puts it thus: 'The Babylonian conquest clearly brought total destruction to Jerusalem and the Judean sites to the south of Jerusalem.'⁶

Meanwhile, the experience of those deported to Babylon seems straightforward enough. Psalm 137 seems to sum up the pain of the exiles, whose tearful lament is elicited by the mere memory of Jerusalem (v. 1). Their experience is of persecution and scorn, of ridicule at the hands of their captors (vv. 2–3). There are passages that paint a more settled and peaceful picture for the exiles. Jeremiah's letter (Jeremiah 29) suggests a community able to settle down, to live peacefully, to marry, have children and generally get on with life (compare Ezekiel 33:30–33). However, other historical sources suggest that among the tactics of conquering empires in the Near East of the time was the forced labour of deported populations. Undoubtedly, thousands of destitute and homeless refugees from a razed city would have been easy candidates for the large-scale projects required by a growing empire. Indeed, there is evidence for the building of a huge canal system around the time of the Babylonians' conquest of Judah. The exiles, at least those Ezekiel was with, were at Kabur, a large canal near the city of Nippur, lending evidence to the theory that they were used as free labour in this massive engineering task.⁷ The language of exile is also frequently dramatic, for example of being 'devoured', 'thrown into confusion', 'swallowed', 'vomited out' (Jeremiah 51:34). Common metaphors employed across the genre of the exilic books to describe the ordeal are words like 'bond', 'fetter', 'imprisonment'.

So what do we conclude from this evidence, both biblical and archaeological? The testimony of exile given in the books of the Bible describe multiple series of events around the destruction of Jerusalem which were brutally violent and traumatic. They also describe an experience of exile which continues to be harsh and

painful for those who lived through it. While some passages may well point to a normalisation of life under both Babylonian rule in Judea and Babylon itself, there is little that argues for anything other than a perilous existence that is a mix of slavery, persecution, distrust and marginalisation within the dominant culture of the Babylonian empire.

But why does this matter? It matters because the experience in which the book of Ezekiel and other exilic writing emerges is key to understanding a theology of exile which we might reflect on in our own times. ‘Any modern “theology of exile” must carefully recall their context, as well as our own context, for any theological reflection on the biblical experience.’⁸ The experience of exile is as fundamental an element of the narrative of God’s people as is the exodus. It is not just mere metaphor for those who follow after. It is as though their experience is part of our experience, their trauma is a resource for us, their response is a testimony on which we can draw with respect and confidence. It matters to understand it as well as we can, so that we can enter not just the words of Ezekiel and those he spoke and wrote among, enter not just his mind, but also his heart and soul.

The response to exile

As individuals, we know that our stories define us: stories of our origins, of those good and dependable things that have made us what we are, where we were born, where we grew up, our education, our parents and other significant relationships during childhood, in particular. But invariably, those elements of our story that have been difficult, even tragic, also play a huge part in shaping who we are. They form a significant part of our narrative, shaping it fundamentally, colouring it indelibly.

So it is for exile. It is clear that the narrative of the people of God takes an enormous and radical turn with the experience of the exile and the new reality that it produced. Far from obliterating the

people of God, or rendering their faith and story null and void, the Babylonian exile 'evoked the most brilliant literature and the most daring theological articulation in the Old Testament'.⁹ A number of themes become most creatively developed in the story of Israel and its literature at this point as responses to the experience of exile.

Firstly, **an emotional response**. Lament is given significant expression. Chief among these expressions is the book of Lamentations which, in five powerful and unashamedly detailed poetic chapters, describes the reality and experience of the destruction of Jerusalem. It is honesty and public sadness that typify this literature. Israel as a people has not only experienced horror but recognises that part of the process of healthily responding to this horror is to detail it and express it.

Detailing and expressing are different. The historians certainly do not shirk on the more prosaic facts of the narrative detail. But it is poetry that Israel turns to, in order to give expression to the visceral pain of these events. Jerusalem is not simply deserted; she is a widow (Lamentations 1:1), a metaphor that weighs the emptiness of the city with the pain of death, grief and desolation. The city is set on fire but is a fire that was 'sent... down into my bones' (Lamentations 1:13), a description that points to the fundamental and personal impact of the loss of the city's key buildings.

The choice of poetry also serves another fundamental need in the aftermath of suffering: the need to slow down. The book of Jonah, which is almost certainly written after the exiles, is a tight and picaresque story of just 48 verses. Nevertheless, it has a chapter of poetry (Jonah 2) just at the point where Jonah's story takes him down into the darkness of the deep sea and the belly of the great fish. It is as if the writer, aware of an audience desperate to move on with the hectic prose of the story and the promise of a resolution of Jonah's predicament, is determined to find a way to slow things down enough to listen to Jonah's pain, a pain which of course is theirs as well.¹⁰

It is not just what is written but the way it is written that reinforces the critical importance of telling it like it is, resisting the urge to minimise and the temptation to move on. Four of the five poems of Lamentations are acrostic poems, each line of which takes us through, in order, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The form is a disciplined one that guards against abbreviation and ensures that suffering is not devalued. The poem is ensuring that we stop and truly take in what has happened, and when we have done it once, we can do it again and again, four times. This happened, says the poem, and we won't forget it or allow the force of its impact to be diminished.¹¹

Secondly, **a social response**. The language of exile is the language of homelessness, expressed very often in familial terms as having been cut off, forgotten, forsaken, *orphaned* by God (Lamentations 5:3, 20). It is as though the family line has been broken and Israel cast adrift. The use of lists and genealogies, like those in Chronicles, is one response to this sense of loss of family identity, a discipline of continuity in the face of utter discontinuity. Studies of refugees have pointed out how the ability to reconstruct a grounded life of meaning in an alien culture is related to their ability to create an agreed story of how things *were*. 'The refugee's self-identity is anchored more to who she or he was than what she or he has become.'¹² What is clear is that Israel suffered a profound loss of identity that elicited a determined effort to tell their story as a way of reaffirming the common understanding of who they *were* in order to begin to affirm who they *are*.

Thirdly, **a theological response**. The loss of Jerusalem, the royal palace and, above all, the temple is catastrophic. These buildings for Israel are not simply utilitarian structures; they symbolise and signify the faithfulness of a God who has entered into an everlasting covenant with one people: them. Their loss puts the fidelity of the covenant promise into complete disarray. Suddenly, the literature is replete with stories of a wholly different nature: doubtful, questioning, ambiguous, shocking stories that have the temerity

to question the fundamentals of the covenant. Is God truly faithful? Is God truly powerful? Is God truly present? A significant strand of the book of Ezekiel focuses these questions on the temple, with the shocking vision of the glory of God departing from the temple (Ezekiel 10), coupled with the extended and detailed vision of the new temple and the return of God's presence (Ezekiel 43). This daring theological literature is offering a way out of the obvious response of despair and towards creative responses that begin to see the nature of God as being capable of expression in new and faithful ways, even in the midst of hostile captivity. They do not provide easy answers. Rather, they delight in interrogating the assumptions on which the status quo was based and begin to offer options for a people who thought being carriers of God's presence and salvation could only happen in a certain way.

Finally, **an ethical response**. A consistent message from the prophets and historians is that the patience of God has finally come to an end and Israel's constant rebellion and idolatry has now brought about his judgement. Jerusalem and the surrounding towns of Judah have been destroyed 'because of the evil they have done' (Jeremiah 44:3). The exile is a direct consequence of Israel's rebellion and stubbornness in the face of numerous warnings of impending judgement (Isaiah 40:2b). Yet this clear arithmetical logic of Israel's sin and God's judgement is also questioned. The book of Job, which most scholars believe also to be a work of the post-exilic period, is clearly bringing into question the straightforward logic of judgement in proportion to sin.

Job experiences a devastating series of calamities which destroy a settled, prosperous existence of some status. He spends the rest of the book defending his innocence to all those who remain convinced of the logic of his guilt, whether he is aware of it or not. This is dangerous stuff, questioning the foundation stone of Jewish theodicy and ethics, so it needs to come up with some clear alternatives – except it doesn't. God responds to Job's insistence on taking his plea to the highest authority but, when he does so, all

reason or logic seems to have been left behind. The ‘answer’ to Job’s question of fault would appear to be an overwhelming theophany (Job 38—41) that doesn’t provide any logical satisfaction but instead seems to put Job’s question into the perspective of a great mystery (Job 42:3).

The book of Jonah also pokes fun at the sin/judgement basis of Jewish ethics. A single, short warning from Jonah in the city of Nineveh, a city with as horrific a reputation as Babylon for cruelty and ruthlessness, brings the Ninevites to repentance (Jonah 3). ‘I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity,’ states Jonah angrily, in response to the deliverance of Nineveh (Jonah 4:2). But is this not an ironic statement placed alongside the consensus on the reasons for the exile? Jonah’s audience recognises Jonah’s doctrinal statement as their own and yet have to place it against the explanation for their own suffering which seems to be that of a God of judgement, not mercy. As seems so often the case with exilic literature, this paradox is not resolved. Rather, it serves as an invitation to play, wrestle, explore in a new kind of highly creative space beyond the old certainties of the past.

The metaphor of exile

Before we come to explore Ezekiel 37 itself, this chapter has taken some time to cover the ground of the events and impact of the exile on the people of God. This is the necessary groundwork of examining the nature of the story which will be used to engage critically with our own experience as custodians of the promises of God. Other stories can act as narrative partners for our own experience as the people of God in our own times. A colleague of mine would cast his vote for the exodus as the key shaping story for our age. Dr Sam Wells uses the story of David and Goliath to explore similar themes on the current state of the church. The story asks, who is the church? Is it David? Or Goliath? Wells argues:

The problem is that the church has assumed for as long as anyone can remember that it's supposed to be Goliath. It's supposed to be huge, it's supposed to be important, it's supposed to be a player on the national stage, it's supposed to be the acknowledged voice of the people. All the things Goliath was. All the things David wasn't.¹³

Immediately, the story helps us see things about our assumptions that we were perhaps not willing to see. It asks difficult questions of us that we would not ask of ourselves.

However, this is not about finding the best metaphor or a perfect match; each story, each metaphor provides valid and important insights and offers new perspectives for our own experience:

The usefulness of a metaphor for rereading our own context is that it is not claimed to be a one-to-one match to 'reality' as though the metaphor of 'exile' actually *describes* our situation. Rather, a metaphor proceeds by having an odd, playful and ill-fitting match to its reality, the purpose of which is to illuminate and evoke dimensions of reality which will otherwise go unnoticed and therefore unexperienced.¹⁴

The context is everything. The story of the exile places the people of God in a context which was unique and, for us, highly apt. They knew what it was to reach a sense of having fulfilled what it meant to be God's chosen people. The covenant promises appeared to have been fulfilled in the establishment of the kingdom of Israel under David and then Solomon. Surely this was what it meant to be the people of God? Surely this was the default setting for being God's chosen people? The language, symbols, rituals and rhythms of life associated with this time of the history of Israel seemed normative. The story is of the establishment of a kingdom under God's rule through the rule of an anointed king, and of the establishment of a system and structure for hosting and administering the holy and purifying presence of God. This seemed like the inevitable result and fulfilment of a process of

development under God's provision and direction. And yet, in the course of a generation, all of this had disappeared.

We know that something similar is happening to us as God's people in the developed western world. 'As long as anyone can remember,' says Wells, we have assumed things about ourselves. And at times we have reverse-engineered theologies to suit that view of ourselves – much like Israel did. But now we must learn to think again, because in the course of a generation or two the assumption that forged, apparently for all eternity, a place for the church in the landscape for our culture, has all but disappeared.

That assumption, that structure, both physical and mental, of identity, status and practice is often called Christendom. It has formed the basis for our sense of place in our own culture for the past 1,500 or so years. The assumption made was that Christianity, as a set of beliefs and collection of practices, played a significant if not defining role in the shaping of our culture and in the day-to-day experience of life for everybody within the western nations. That assumption has now been eroded to the point of collapse over the last century. To read a longer narrative of the process of exile for the church, you might like to read: Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Baker Books, 2008); Michael Frost, *Exiles* (Baker Books, 2006); or Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile* (IVP, 2015). Each traces the shift the church has experienced, accelerating since World War II, from a place at the centre of things to an uncertain place as just one voice in the marketplace of ideas, one player in an evolving drama on a very crowded stage. As Brueggemann describes it:

There was a time... when the Christian preacher could count on the shared premises of the listening community, reflective of a large theological consensus. There was a time, when the assumption of God completely dominated western imagination, and the holy Catholic Church roughly uttered the shared consensus of all parties. That consensus was rough and perhaps not very healthy, but at least the preacher could work from it.¹⁵

Or, as Lee Beach puts it:

In the post-Christian revolution, it is fair to say that the church is one of those former power brokers who once enjoyed a place of influence at the cultural table but has been chased away from its place of privilege and is now seeking to find where it belongs amid the ever-changing dynamics of contemporary culture.¹⁶

As with Israel, the initial forms of responses we may want to make to this predicament are perhaps denial and despair before they can ever become hope or creativity. If Israel's experience was one of homelessness, a metaphor which encompasses both the loss of core relationship as well as the elements of displacement and disorientation, then the desire to rediscover home could come through a nostalgic vision of restoration, assimilation into the dominant culture or, somehow, a creative reassertion of identity in the alien context.

If we too have been made homeless, 'chased away', to use Beach's term, from our sense of place within western culture, then we too are looking for routes home – and perhaps we can already begin to see, with the application of this metaphor, the extent to which we are in denial, despair or hope. We may be aware of the extent to which we are looking longingly over our shoulder to find a way home or looking into the uncertainty of the landscape in front of us. (That might even be seascape, for there is nothing certain about the surface in front of us, which is surely more fluid than solid.)

What becomes clear from the exilic literature, and increasingly from our understanding of the life of the exiles in both Babylon and Judea, is that a road beyond denial and despair began to be navigated. The two great temptations of despair and assimilation appear to have been worked through creatively, and beyond them a new way of being faithful to their call and identity as the people of God began to emerge. If we follow this story and reflect carefully

on it for our own context, might we too begin to create new paths, new imaginations, new confidence in our own explorations of the way ahead?



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