

Chapter 8  
"By the Waters of Babylon": The Exile of Judah

From that moment on the people of Judah were divided into three groups and they followed three different tracks of development.

One group went into exile in Egypt. A portion of them settled in a community along the Nile that became known as the Elephantine community, its site near the present Aswan Dam. Others of them settled in the cities of Egypt. They developed a peculiar form of Judaism that was to bring together Egyptian mysticism, Jewish religion and Greek philosophy — a deviant form of Judaism more interesting to scholars of the antiquities than to men and women seeking faith today.

The second group, the largest of the three numerically, stayed in the environs of Jerusalem. Theirs was a sad existence. They lived near their sacred city, but the glory was stripped from it. They could still worship their God but this was the God who had been unable to protect them from their enemies so God's power was suspect. They were a leaderless people since their leaders had been hounded into exile. They had to make a new life for themselves since their homes and their fields had been raped and burned. Their feelings were expressed in passages from the book we now call Lamentations, a collection of poems into which they poured their grief:

How lonely sits the city that was full of people!  
How like a widow has she become,  
    she that was great among the nations!  
She that was a princess among the cities has become a vassal.  
She weeps bitterly in the night,  
    tears on her cheeks;  
Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her;  
All her friends have dealt treacherously with her,  
    they have become her enemies.

The third group went into the land of Babylon. It was a small group of people, numbering perhaps 2,000. They were deported into the city of Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. By and large, these deportees were the priests and princes, the leaders of the people. That their feelings also ran deep is seen in the 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm, in some respects the saddest psalm in our psalter:

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept  
when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our lyres.  
For there our captors required of us songs,  
And our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you.  
If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

They faced a tremendous problem. They too might be assimilated into the local culture as were their northern neighbors, the Israelites of Samaria, when the 27,000 of them were deported to Ninevah in 722. It did not happen, and it is for this reason that what occurred to this small group in Babylon during the exile is so important to the life of faith of both Christians and Jews.

The group set itself to two tasks. First, they began to collect accounts of the history and traditions of their people and to cast them into a point of view that would make some sense of the disaster that had overtaken them. They declared that God was punishing Israel and Judah for their unfaithfulness to God and that the exile they were suffering had come upon them not because of the weakness of Yahweh but because of the strength of Yahweh’s just and purifying love. They also performed a cultic task putting at the center of their religious practices certain ancient rites and observances that to his moment had been scattered about the misty edges of their faith: the sabbath, circumcision, and annual observance of the Passover were chief among them. Above all, these exiles in Babylon were nourished by a promise: one of their prophets proclaimed that God had forgiven the sins that brought them into exile and God was about to return them to their homeland.

There was good historical reason for what this prophet was saying. Even as he was reporting it, important changes were taking place in world affairs. Babylon’s empire was about to be destroyed and replaced by the rule of the Persians. Replacing Assyrian power in 612, Babylon was itself displaced by Cyrus of Persia in 539. Babylon’s rule had lasted only 75 years.

Cyrus had begun his march to power around 550 B.C. He had been a vassal ruler in a small region of the empire in southern Iran. But he had ambitions, and he marched the small armies he commanded to the east toward India, and he consolidated his power in that area. Then he cut back north of Babylon across upper Mesopotamia into Asian Minor and took control of that region. By this time his power was so great that Babylon itself could not withstand it. He massed his forces on the borders of Babylon, and resistance collapsed. In October of 539, Cyrus’ troops marched into Babylon without a fight, and a few weeks later the king himself entered. Babylon was ended and a new power ruled the world. Within the year the Persian empire extended throughout all Western Asia to the Egyptian frontier.

Cyrus was the first world ruler in more than three centuries to understand that to be a great emperor one did not have to be a despot. His policy toward the people he conquered was one of tolerance and restoration. Assyria's policy had been systematic deportation; Babylon's policy was also deportation, but they were never as systematic about it as the Assyrians were. The policy of the Persians, however, was that of restoration and reparations. They intended to restore to their homelands those persons who wanted to return from their former places of exile, and they would make reparations for the peoples whose lands and cities had been taken from them.

The Judahites took advantage of Cyrus' policy. A governor named Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest led the returning Jewish exiles. These two men posed as the new David and the new Zadok, king and priest destined by God to restore Judah to its former glories. The prophets Hagar and Zechariah proclaimed that when the Temple was completed, Yahweh would return to Jerusalem, and Zion would again become the center of world empire. These were heady days for the exiles as well as for those who had remained in Jerusalem and who now welcomed back their fathers and sons. But performance did not match promise. Work on the Temple began around 535 and dragged on for twenty long years. When it was finally completed, this Temple of Zerubbabel bore only a slight and uncomplimentary resemblance to the graceful Temple of Solomon. Bickering broke out among the factions around Jerusalem, energies flagged before the enormous task of rebuilding both land and society, and a curtain mercifully drops over our attempts to reconstruct these events: we know next to nothing about what happened in Judah from 515 to around 450 B.C., except that Judah was at its lowest ebb politically, religiously, and culturally. Our lack of any source for describing the plight of the land and people is our clearest indication that Judah was without direction, without leadership, without a sense of destiny.

Then, around 450, word came back to the Jewish group in Babylon about the desperate state of affairs around Jerusalem. The word was transmitted to the King of the Persians by a man named Nehemiah. Nehemiah, an officer in the king's court and a member of the Jewish community, reported to King Darius that the Temple was in disrepair, the walls of the city had not been rebuilt and the people living there were dispirited and broken. He secured permission from the king to return to restore the Temple and re-establish the religion of the people. Leading a small group of people along the old trade route across the desert to Jerusalem, and assuming the governorship of the area, he set to work with a will and in forty-five days rebuilt the walls of the city. For the first twenty days of his labor, the people of the surrounding territories laughed at him, and in the last three weeks they actively tried to stop him. With sword in one hand and trowel in the other, Nehemiah's men rebuilt the wall.

Along with Nehemiah came the practices the Jews had worked out in Babylon, and he tried to introduce these to the Jewish community that had remained around Jerusalem. What he initiated was carried on by Ezra. Ezra had the people come before the Temple, and he read the law to them; this may have been the first time they had heard the law put so rigorously, because up to now the law had been observed only in Babylon. Ezra asked the people to accept

this new law and to make a covenant with God that they would do so, even though for some of them this meant giving up non-Jewish wives and children and living by an ethical standard that was a great deal more binding than anything they had ever lived under before. They did so; the people of Jerusalem, many of them, responded to the law of Ezra brought with him and bound themselves to it through a covenant and a promise. In doing this, they transformed the nature of their national life; no longer was Judah a nation whose membership was determined by birth; Judaism was now a religious community who bound themselves to it by their own oath.