

Chapter Seven: Israel's Experience of Exile – Work as Survival in Pagan Civilization

When God punished Israel, He drove them out of the promised land and flung them into exile. It was a motif consistent with the creational account of Adam and Eve being driven out of the garden of God and into exile. In this context of separation from the promised land, work then became an interesting category for Israel. How would they live? The land-based life of Proverbs could not be lived, and this raises three major questions for us. First, was work done by an exiled Israel conducted with God's approval apart from the promised land? Second, how are we to understand the plight of the majority of Israelites as compared with the lofty achievements of Joseph, Daniel, Esther, and Mordecai, the four highest ranking Israelites-in-exile? Third, to what extent did exiled Israel testify to the cyclical patterns of work in the pagan world or even the coming judgment on pagan civilizations? Throughout, we will ask what the church is to learn from these episodes of Israel in exile.

First, did work done by an exiled Israel meet with God's approval? If so, in what sense? With what corresponding attitude from Israel? First, we have Israel's enslavement in Egypt as an example where participation in pagan forms of work was viewed negatively. Aside from the more general slave work that Israel performed for Egypt (which can surely be viewed negatively due to God's dealing with Egypt), Israel built Pithom (the House of Thom) and Raamses, cities named after Egypt's gods. There is a clear link between the work Egypt engaged in and the idols they worshiped. There was no divine approval concerning this, but a conflict arose that brought the tension between Israel and Egypt to a climax. Egypt's work interfered with God's call for Israel to be a people set apart. In this case, when the Hebrews wanted to celebrate a feast to God and worship Him, Pharaoh accused them of being lazy: 'You are lazy, very lazy. Therefore you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' (Ex.5:17) In this instance, work done in pagan lands is not directly sinful, but it was an oppressive condition imposed upon them. Thus, it fell under God's judgment with God's judgment on Egypt.

Second, we have Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian exiles, which, taken by itself, is more positive. Jeremiah counseled Israel to seek the welfare of the city because for the seventy years of their captivity, their welfare coincided with Babylon's (Jer.29:7). Hence, work done by Israel in the Babylonian exile seems to be viewed affirmatively, and perhaps as a means by which God blesses other nations, even Babylon. This work was permitted and encouraged by God. This passage has become quite popular with Christians who see an easy relation between Israel's exile and the church's loss of institutional power and cultural influence, or Christians who wish to apply Jeremiah 29:7 to urban renewal programs of various forms. But inadequate attention has been paid to other texts. Israel also possessed Jeremiah's condemnation of Babylon in later chapters (Jer.50 – 51), which perhaps should receive more weight because of the sheer volume of the prophecies and its positioning at the end of the book of Jeremiah. Especially relevant is the declaration, 'We would have healed Babylon, but she cannot be healed; let us leave her and each go to his own land, for her judgment reaches to the skies, it rises as high as the clouds' (Jer.51:9). Israel also possessed prophetic warnings against Babylon's idolatry in Isaiah 40 – 55, an oracle of judgment on Babylon in Isaiah 13 – 14, the archetypal warning of Genesis 1 – 11 in which Babylon was identified as an opponent to God's purposes, and behind all that, the towering influence of Genesis 1 – 4. All this made it evident to the exiles that Babylon was not to endure, that God's true humanity would one day be restored to being provisioned by God's blessed land, and that God's judgment would fall also on the city in which they once lived, the city to which their welfare was once linked, but only temporarily so.

If we were to compile our learning from these two events alone, we would conclude something like this: Work done in pagan lands may have been a necessity for Israel, and God allowed and even encouraged them to participate in it, but within limits. Israel was never to give up their distinctive practices (e.g. keeping the sabbath and festival calendar, worship, prayer, refusal to worship idols, etc.) even when pressured to do so. Work had its limits and was plainly subordinate to God's commandments. At least partially as a result of this distinctiveness, Israel's participation in the work of pagan nations did not make the Jews acceptable to them; they were always viewed with suspicion, suspected of political subversion, and persecuted. Simply because work was a necessity did not make it ultimately acceptable to God, and Israel was never to misunderstand what these pagan civilizations were doing. In both cases, work was contextualized within the idolatrous systems of the two pagan nations, and Israel needed to be very circumspect about that environment. In both cases, God ultimately destroyed the work, including the contribution made by the Israelites themselves.

To this we must add data from another concern: How are we to understand the plight of the majority of Israelites as compared with the lofty achievements of Joseph, Daniel, and Esther? Are we to take these individuals as examples of faithful employees in pagan work? Should Christians desire or expect to be as influential as they were? Joseph, for instance, seems amenable to modern work concerns; God made 'all that Joseph did to prosper' (Gen.39:3, 23), which of course is an attractive notion to someone in the workplace. Joseph's integrity lends itself well to teachings on marketplace temptations. And Joseph's upward mobility, recognition by his superiors, tension with his peers, and supremely humanitarian achievement also tend to be appropriated by Jews and Christians looking for models of faithful employment. On the other hand, attention has typically not been paid to the fact that Joseph's

employment was totally involuntary and unsought by him; it is more difficult for most of us to claim that getting large amounts of schooling and training happened involuntarily when we knew it would lead to our social and economic promotion.

Work in pagan lands did not possess intrinsic value for Israel, only instrumental value as a means of preserving the nation. As much statecraft and managerial skills as Joseph, Daniel, Esther, and Mordecai had, nowhere do we find that the work they did *in and of itself* meant anything. In fact, work done by these high-ranking Israelites contributed to the work of the Gentile city. As a result of Joseph's administration, Pharaoh reaped a windfall selling grain to the world community and established near-complete state ownership over all Egypt's lands (Gen.47:20 – 26). Likewise Babylon and the Medo-Persians, partially as a result of Daniel's administration, became great imperial powers with effective imperial bureaucracies (Dan.2:48 – 49; 6:2 – 3). Mordecai apparently helped King Ahasuerus implement a tax across the Medo-Persian Empire (Est.10:1). These circumstances are not incidental to the texts, nor to our subject, work. Egypt, Babylon, and Medo-Persia set out to do the work of consolidating their domains, just like Babel of old set out to consolidate its subjects. In being promoted so high, Joseph and Daniel performed the ambivalent work, the work of the city. With Esther, we feel further relativizing or counterbalancing influences, since Esther was in the same role of preserving the Jewish nation. In fact, in becoming queen of Persia, she equaled the height of Joseph and Daniel. Her meteoric rise, however, had nothing to do with her abilities. She was not a great administrator, nor did she have occupational skills or an educational background that play any part in the story. She did nothing to reach her high status besides win a beauty pageant, which is somewhat embarrassing to those of us who believe that occupational aptitude, in the final analysis, is really God's mode of operation. God may use Israelites who do conventional work in pagan lands, but He may also bypass them altogether. God's mode of operation is inscrutable and cannot necessarily be identified with human success, even the successful work of His chosen people. This coincides with the observations we have made earlier.

Furthermore, it is simply not true that God always elevates the work of exiled Israelites and will also do so for Christians who are aliens in their own countries. What about the countless other Israelites who went into exile? Did they all experience promotions and so on? Clearly not. A deeper issue is at stake, namely, the Abrahamic promise. In Joseph, Daniel, and Esther, the theological issue undergirding their experience is God's promise to bless those who bless the seed of Abraham. That is, of course, a major theme of the book of Genesis. Potiphar, the Egyptian jailer, and Pharaoh himself reap the benefits of God's stipulation. In Daniel and Esther, Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus receive similar benefits. Likewise, negative consequences also befall those who do not look kindly on the seed of Abraham. It seems to me, therefore, that for Christians to responsibly appropriate this motif, we must look at how this aspect of the Abrahamic promise falls on the church.

These episodes serve a covenantal purpose, not an individualistic one. Methodologically, we must understand the Bible's central concerns and differentiate them from what may seem to be exciting applications to our own individualistic concerns, such as how to participate faithfully in government or marketplace leadership, wield influence at high levels, etc. These stories reflect how God was remaining faithful to His promise to Abraham (Gen.12:1 – 3). He preserved the nation of Israel in exile and captivity through the mediation of a strategically placed individual who was so placed without any active choice on their own part. And He blessed those who blessed Abraham's seed, and cursed those who cursed them.

This seems to be the primary emphasis in the unusual book of Esther. The absence of God's name in the book, so disturbing to Martin Luther, is explicable and understandable. God may seem hidden behind the panorama of history, especially in Israel's exile and the ascendance of the major geo-political powers dominating the Middle East, but His protection of Israel may still be observed. It required, however, the mysterious conjoining of God's will and human will so familiar to readers of biblical narrative; the relationship between any given exiled Israelite and God's mysterious but providential protection for His exiled people was most evident in Mordecai's eloquent challenge to Esther, 'If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place' (Est.4:14). One can perhaps never know which Israelite or even which human actions God will use to preserve His people from a threat, but every Israelite should always be sensitive to the vulnerable position of all the Jews. This interaction between Mordecai and Esther is all the more significant because it is the center of a classic Hebrew chiasm, which makes it the turning point and the main point of the story. From one perspective, the quick-moving story was geared to inspire faith in exiled Israelites to be willing to undertake subtle but self-endangering actions (like Esther's risk-taking in entering King Ahasuerus' throne room) when a plot to exterminate the Jews became apparent and God Himself seemed hidden. From another perspective, it reassured the exiled nation that the God who seems hidden to them is still acting on their behalf. The Joseph and Daniel stories basically emphasize the same. The 'ascension' motif is related to 'the vindication of the covenant people.'

The nature of God's commitment to His promise to Abraham takes renewed force with Jesus Christ. Jesus' ascension represents the current and future vindication of his covenant people. God's promise to Abraham is still in effect, but God seems to be fulfilling it in a different manner. In 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul says that God will punish

those who persecute the church, but that punishment will fall on the other side of the bifurcated eschatology Paul sees in the Messianic age. 'These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, *when he comes to be glorified in his saints on that day*, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, for our testimony to you was believed' (2 Thess.1:9 – 10, italics mine). Generally speaking, there is no immediate punishment falling on those who persecute the church; God's judgment in the matter has been postponed, though not forever. God will execute His wrath in that last day. Likewise, God's blessing on those who bless Abraham's seed (who are now those who believe in Christ and are 'in him') will also fall in the age to come, but they are given a foretaste of the coming age with the indwelling Spirit (Gal.3:14 – 16). *Our continued existence is ensured by the fact that one among us, the man Jesus, has been exalted and enthroned to the highest place*; the high-ranking Israelites were a thematic anticipation of this. Thus, blessing and cursing Abraham's seed becomes one's response to the message of Jesus Christ through the church. The stakes are dramatically increased – they are eternal blessing or cursing in the age to come – and God's responses to protect His people and to judge their enemies, which may have been relatively quick before, will occur when the coming age utterly displaces this present evil age.

If this literary analysis is correct, then the church would be ill-advised to perform a straightforward translation of the Old Testament exilic deliverance narratives to contemporary employment situations. There are simply too many themes of major theological importance converging in these narratives to reduce them to that. Moreover, there is no New Testament text (as we shall see in the next chapter) that suggests that Christians should seek to occupy positions like Joseph, Daniel, Esther, or Mordecai did, even to prevent heavy persecution from falling on the church, though such has certainly happened in history. Instead, the weight of the biblical admonitions goes the other way; Christians must accept persecution and be willing to die as traitors to their nations. This is not to say that Christians should not seek to protect other vulnerable people or ignore influential positions out of hand. But our understanding of such activity must be derived from some other theological entry point, which we will propose in a later chapter.

Our third inquiry concerns how Israel may have challenged their pagan neighbors while they were in exile. Did they either testify to the cyclical patterns of work in the pagan world or forecast God's judgment on pagan civilizations? In regards to the former, we do not have explicit evidence that the Israelites preached Ecclesiastes, for instance, to prick existential despair in their pagan neighbors, but I find it highly likely that they did something of the sort. Israel possessed, after all, their creation and fall narratives, which discussed the futility sown by the curse. They possessed Isaiah's sarcastic criticism of Babylonian idolatry, which probably challenged major industries there (see also the response of the idolatrous Ephesians to Paul in Acts 19). And if Jacques Ellul is correct, if Ecclesiastes was written partially in response to the incursion of Greek philosophy into Israel,¹ then it would have been quite natural for Israel to wield that book.

In regards to the latter, the forecasting of God's judgment on pagan civilizations, we have an abundance of material. Israel constantly foresaw God's judgment on these pagan civilizations in which they were exiled or with which they trafficked. In fact, it is important to note that the prophets who spoke the most about Israel's exilic experience also engaged most heavily in the criticism and condemnation of other civilizations and the activities in which they were engaged. They constantly portrayed the nations surrounding Israel as warlike, steeped in idolatry, and unjust. The Genesis framework of the thematic antithesis between land and city helps us in our analysis of these prophetic texts. Of necessity Israel had to live and work in these other contexts, the civilizations that were thematically aligned with the rebels Cain and Nimrod and historically identified by their capital cities (e.g. Nineveh, Babylon, etc.). Strangely, the exilic prophets spoke very little about exilic ethics in a pagan environment, issues of sacrifice without a Temple, the meaning of community laws in a fragmented community, the preservation of justice apart from land, etc. Instead we have a surprising lack of material along these lines. And we have pages devoted to judgment on the pagan nations.

This observation touches upon a larger issue. Some theological or ethical tensions are not resolved philosophically in the Old Testament; they are resolved historically and experientially. For example, suffering for Job is not resolved philosophically, i.e. Job does not offer a philosophical integration of a good God, an evil Satan, and human suffering. But suffering is resolved historically and experientially (suggests Job) because God will ultimately be true to His love and goodness. Similarly, being exiled aliens in a pagan civilization is not completely philosophically resolved. We do not know how Israel's faithful covenant God can allow her to be in exile for so long in a heathen civilization, or how Israel can continue to be God's true humanity while in this condition. And how exactly Israel was to live in these other civilizations is a problem that haunts Jews even today (the writings of Chaim Potok illustrate well the tensions of going from a 'people of the land' to a 'people of the book'). But it will

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: Meditations on Ecclesiastes* (Eerdmans)

be resolved historically and experientially when God acts on behalf of His people. This is why Isaiah and Jeremiah, in foreseeing the exile, spoke of divine judgment on Moab, Ammon, Philistia, Assyria, and Babylon; or why Nahum, Habbakuk, and Zephaniah spoke of the destruction of Nineveh and the Assyrians; or why Joel and Ezekiel prophesied God's judgment on Tyre. This relation between Israel's exile and sharp prophetic judgment of pagan civilizations is no accident. It is a necessary and intrinsic relation borne out by the Hebrew expectation that God will resolve tensions historically and experientially for His people, a people who live in dissonance remembering the purity lost from the early pages of Genesis, who feel some measure of uncertainty remembering what was expected of them from the Revelation at Sinai. This is why we must hold Jeremiah's reassurance to the exiles together with his absolute condemnation of Babylon. The former takes its place within the latter. The pragmatic but temporary posture is informed by the future destiny of the city:

We would have healed Babylon, but she cannot be healed; let us leave her and each go to his own land, for her judgment reaches to the skies, it rises as high as the clouds. (Jer.51:9)...So Jeremiah wrote in a single scroll all the calamity which would come upon Babylon, that is, all the words which have been written concerning Babylon. Then Jeremiah said to Seraiah, 'As soon as you come to Babylon, then see that you read all these words aloud, and say, 'Thou, O LORD, have promised concerning this place to cut it off, so that there will be nothing dwelling in it, whether man or beast, but it will be a perpetual desolation.' And it will come about as soon as you finish reading this scroll, you will tie a stone to it and throw it into the middle of the Euphrates, and say, 'Just so shall Babylon sink down and not rise again, because of the calamity that I am going to bring upon her, and they will become exhausted.' (Jer.51:60 - 64)

The framework from Genesis prevented Israel (and prevents us) from separating activity from attitude to create philosophical syntheses between the pagan civilizations and Israel. In other words, Israel would never have hypothesized whether Tyre, for instance, could have engaged in its commercial activity (its work) and stayed humble in attitude, or whether Babylon could have engaged in imperialistic activity (its work) but with a reverence for Israel's God, or whether Jews could participate readily in Tyre's commerce or Babylon's conquests and do so as a task given them by YHWH. The one is philosophically incompatible with the other. It is an 'either-or': either God's commands or rebellion, either promised land or Gentile city, either be Israel or be pagan. Call it a cluster of activity, attitude, and allegiance, or a cluster of ethics, faith, and community; all go hand in hand. One either accepts God's definition of what it means to be His true humanity in all things, or one goes another way. Those were the only two options. In this bewildering exilic period, the Israelites may have been away from the promised land but they were yearning for it in accordance with God's promise. While Israel was aligned with God and the blessed land, their neighbors were aligned with paganism and the city. Naturally, Israel would one day be vindicated and restored to the blessed land, while their neighbors, like Babel of old, would be scattered and destroyed.

The presence of Christian apocalyptic expectation serves a similar purpose for Christians as the Hebrew prophets did for Israel. The issue is not altered whether one is a preterist or premillennialist in interpreting the book of Revelation alone; Paul taught the same outlook in 1 Corinthians independent of all John's symbolic accoutrements, as we shall see in a later chapter. Christians must live and work as aliens in pagan nations, which are thematically identified as the city of man, Babylon the Great. Of necessity they must be a part of these civilizations without losing their distinctiveness, yet they must not accept the notions put forward by those civilizations about work, among other things. The ethical tensions are not completely clear and demarcated, but the eschatological destiny of the human city is. Humanity's accomplishments outside of Jesus Christ will be consumed. Christians therefore are not to have the same attitudes as the people around them. God's true humanity, now defined as those who are in Christ, will find their blessed land and holy city in the age to come.

The Old Testament's View of Work

Let us finish this section with some summary observations about the Old Testament view of work.

Genesis

1. Before the Fall, God gave humanity a form of work (spreading a garden) that was originally good and in balance with the creation and human spirituality and physicality.
2. However, work in its current form is affected by God's curse on human sin, made harder and less pleasant.
3. Currently, work is circular and repetitive in nature. Therefore, we cannot satisfy our sense of significance or accomplishment in work. Although we may be tempted to place our identity in work, given that it's more of a challenge, this is exactly what God does not wish.
4. Currently, work revolves around human civilization and is a non-Israelite (pagan) way of trying to overcome human alienation from God's good land. Literarily and theologically, work is aligned with the human city.

Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes

5. God is a worker, true, but His work in creation is finished and He now simply maintains the sun, moon, stars, and seasons in what we would call repetitious work.
6. Work is not an area of life where we can feel entitled to intrinsic satisfaction as if the work itself accomplishes something lasting. Today, although this is the specific arena where many people find financial or material security, and even emotional stimulation, we do not have any right to expect intrinsically satisfying work.
7. Simultaneously, work in a form understood by Solomon in Ecclesiastes is still intrinsically a gift from God, not because it is interesting, influential, or allows for advancement, but because we can understand the futility of life that God ordained for us and look to God Himself amidst our work.
8. As we work, we can expect God to build in us character qualities (contentment even amidst disappointment, patience amidst repetition, perhaps even inner reconciliation with our parents, etc.) and a longing to participate in the resurrection of Christ, the only way out of the iron circle of death that circumscribes human life and work.
9. Work is the arena that human beings have tried to control nature and God for general security. The desire for control must be regarded as suspect. Solomon repudiated this as vain.
10. Work is an arena where human beings have tried to control each other. This is also inappropriate.

Implications from the Pre-Exilic Writings (e.g. Samuel)

11. Within Israel, the work of institution-building and political centralization and stabilization – attempt to achieve a settled permanence – was viewed with deep suspicion. This is evident especially from Judges and Samuel, where there was a shift from a decentralized and ad-hoc political organization of charismatic judge-prophets to a centralized and permanent institution of kingship.
12. God's willingness to temporarily adopt such actions involved making the monarchy, Jerusalem, and the Temple foreshadowings, or 'pointers' to Jesus. This sets constraints around how we can and cannot interpret books like Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, books which themselves display a keen awareness of this pattern. With the advent of Jesus, these institutions were simultaneously fulfilled and surpassed, resulting in a 'pilgrimage' ethic once again.

Implications from the Exilic Writings

13. Work in the context of pagan civilizations was permitted and to some degree encouraged, but was also limited. Israel always had to maintain some distinctive practices in these pagan environments, including those that interrupted pagan work, for instance, the sabbath.
14. The work Israel performed, Israel expected to be destroyed by God when He judged the pagan nations and restored Israel.
15. The work done by the high-ranking Israelites was instrumental, not intrinsic, in value, to the end that they were in a position to protect the Jewish community. This was the outworking of the Abrahamic promise in Israel's history before Jesus Christ, where God would sustain Israel and those who blessed the seed of Abraham would be blessed in turn. I do not believe that the church can appropriate the narratives of Joseph, Daniel, and Esther for contemporary employment situations.