

TO THE CHRISTIAN EXILES IN BABYLON:
A LETTER FOR LIVING IN THE CITY OF MAN

Chad W. Hussey

Introduction

In *The City of God*, Augustine teaches that in creation there are basically two cities: the city of God, and the city of man.¹ The city of God is the kingdom of believers—the church, and the city of man is the world—symbolized throughout the Bible by the city of Babylon. In the book of Jeremiah, the nation of Judah is taken captive and exiled to Babylon. In Jeremiah 29:4-14, God gives specific instructions for how he desires His exiled people to engage the *city of man*. From a canonical biblical theology of ‘*continuing exile*’², Christians can be seen as a dispersion, free from captivity, but sojourning in the world and not yet home. God’s people today are still dwelling throughout the world in the *city of man*. Through this lens, God’s instructions to the exiles in Babylon, in Jeremiah 29, have specific application not only to His Judean exiles, but also to His ‘elect exiles in the dispersion’ today (1 Pet 1:11). As Jeremiah’s letter calls the Judean exiles to glorify God by giving their lives to the *shalom* of their gentile captor; Christians should glorify God by loving their non-believing neighbors (Mark 12:31) in

¹Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo, *The City of God* (New York: Modern Library, 1993).

²This term is borrowed from N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992), 268-271.

seeking the welfare and flourishing of the cities to which God has called them. Like the Judean exiles in Babylon, in desiring the welfare of their cities, Christians too will find *shalom*. The commands expressed in Jeremiah verses four through fourteen have strong and profound implications for modeling the posture of Christ's sojourning disciples and their engagement in the present culture surrounding them.

“The Messenger Formula, ‘Thus says the Lord,’ is used more often [in Jeremiah 29] than in any other chapter of Jeremiah.”³ These statements are significant indicators mapping the outline of the text. To validate the application of Jeremiah 29:4-14 to the New Testament church, a verse-by-verse exposition will be performed by breaking the passage into the three sections marked by the statements, “Thus says the Lord.” First there will be a brief examination of the historicity, provenance, destination, and transmission of Jeremiah's letter. Then the three sections will be examined under their key summarizing directives: 1) to commit, 2) to deny, and 3) to behold (in wonder and trust). These directives are applied to the three sections respectively. Within this framework there will be an expounding of God's desired activity for the exiles in Babylon specifically. Following the exposition of the passage there will be an explanation of the biblical theology of ‘*continuing exile*.’ In this explanation it will be exegetically demonstrated that Jeremiah 29 is the first major pivot point for the redefinition of the geo-political identity of God's people, and God's first step toward expanding Israel's spiritual borders in preparation for His salvation plan for the gentile nations. This section will further demonstrate that God's people remain sojourners living in exile to this day. Provided the exilic continuity between the Judean exiles and the sojourning church, in tandem with the continuity of the directives of Jeremiah's letter and the New Testament teachings of Christ; special attention will be called to the typological significance of the exiles and Babylon, and their typological fulfillment in Christ

³Andrew G. Shead, *A Mouth Full of Fire: The Word of God in the Words of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 235.

and the world. The conclusion will then follow the outline of Jeremiah's letter again to provide application for the imitators of Christ sojourning in the world today.

Exposition: Jeremiah 29: 4-14

Background, Verses 1-3

Immediately in verse 1 Jeremiah tells the reader that what follows is a letter written by Jeremiah, sent to the exiles in Babylon, regarding God's directions and comfort for the people. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken out of Jerusalem. Further, the letter issues a warning to those Judeans resisting compliance with Yahweh's will for their surrender to the Babylonians. To the exiles God says, "Endure!", and to those remaining in Jerusalem God says, "Repent and link with your exiled brothers!" For decades Jeremiah had been prophesying the coming judgment of God upon His people, and this judgment has arrived in the form of Babylonian troops, here, in the year 597 B. C.

Babylon, earlier known as Babel (Gen 11), is the typification of *the city of man*, the city of the secular spirit, and great tempter of men (Gen 11:4, Rev 18:3). Babylon is the worldly, wicked, godless, and assimilated city that strives after self and against God. Jeremiah then writes this letter shortly after the first exile of Judeans to give them guidance in making their way in the new land. "The design of the Prophet was at the same time twofold; for he not only intended to mitigate by comfort the sorrow of the exiles, but designed also to break down the obstinacy of his own nation." The Jews "had set their minds on an unreasonable deliverance [wishing to] immediately break through and extricate themselves from the yoke laid on them."⁴ Hence it made sense that the Jews should not remain amongst the dregs in Jerusalem, longing for a return to former glory, but should move forward in joining with the new calling of God upon His people. In this new work in Babylon, verse seven says the people of God will find their welfare; but in verse seventeen Jeremiah instructs that those who cling to the past, resisting to go to

⁴J. Calvin, & J. Owen, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2015), 412.

Babylon and work for the welfare of the wicked captors, will be destroyed. Those who felt fortunate to have remained in Jerusalem, believing the comforts of home were a benefit to them, were warned they would face a far worse fate.

At this time, Zedekiah became the fifth king to sit on the throne of Judah in a thirty year span, and the result was an incredibly unstable time for Judah politically. As is typically the case in calamity and grieving, there are two groups present amongst the Jews: those who over-react in fear and desperation, and those who cling to false hopes for a return to prior conditions. Amongst this group hoping for simple resolution are tribal-minded agitators and diviners who seek to stir resistance to the new order. *Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles* is an open letter that Zedekiah has approved and has commissioned the king's ambassadors, Elasah and Gemariah, to hand-deliver to Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar allowed its delivery, not out of benevolence, but because the pro-Babylonian message served Nebuchadnezzar's wishes in encouraging the Israelite assimilation in Babylon. The letter further served to discourage unrest among those who desired either segregation or an uprising.

Section 1 - "Thus says the Lord" - Commit

Verse 4

The first section marked by the phrase "Thus says the Lord," verses four through seven, contains a list of positive "do this" commands that Yahweh gave to the Judeans in exile. The key take-away within this section is that God is calling for His people to commit. Yahweh desires the exiles to stop straddling the fence between settling in Babylon and holding out for an alternate reality. God says, "This is your reality. Commit yourselves to do these things."

Verse 5

In verse five, the Lord instructs the Israelites to commit to Babylon. Yahweh commands this saying, "Build houses." More important to Yahweh than the Israelites having adequate shelter is their adoption of a settled state in Babylon. Yahweh's desire is that the exiles will make the city their home. In the verses that follow, Yahweh will give the Israelites several

tasks of service that cannot be fulfilled by a people who are resisting involvement, remaining disengaged from their surroundings. Further to this end God says, “Plant a garden.” This instruction does not immediately translate to the present, but the concept holds. In Judah, gardens were not recreational. A large majority of the population were either farmers by trade or were dependent on personal gardens for their family’s food supply. Building houses and planting gardens are no small amount of work. Gardens require work to prepare, cultivate, and sow. Gardens require a season to bear a harvest. It takes several seasons of tilling and harvesting for the soil to develop the eco-system required for reaping good produce. Thus, the building of homes, and the keeping of gardens are not small undertakings. They require much personal expenditure and investment. Building houses and planting gardens means planting roots. This means commitment. God is saying, “Plant roots here. Invest yourselves here. Make this place home.” The Israelites should expect to be in this place for an extended time, and should abandon any vain notions they have about returning home. This is a call to stop the split-minded half-heartedness. Yahweh is telling them to, “Cease straddling the two limbs of My will and your desire. Desire My will.” Yahweh is calling for their full commitment to His chosen location for them, and their full commitment to His work and plans in the city.

Israel’s relationship to God as status-quo in Israel was not working. Yahweh desired to break the Israelites from their settled state. God’s people have grown hard and forgotten how to mourn their sin (Matt 5:4). In Judah, the Hebrews had become sunbaked, hardened ground, producing no harvest. God desired to churn the soil of the Jewish national soul for the cultivating of fruit. The Hebrew word for exile, Galah (גלה), literally means: to uncover, expose, reveal, lay bare, or unearth. This is exactly the activity Yahweh performs in the exile. He churns the spiritual soil of the Israelite people. A. W. Tozer speaks this way about the fallow field:

The fallow [or the unplanted] field is smug, contented, protected from the shock of the plow and the agitation of the harrow [or being broken up]. Such a field as it lies year after year, becomes a familiar landmark to the crow and the blue jay. [. . .] Safe and undisturbed, it sprawls lazily in the sunshine, the picture of sleepy contentment. But it is paying a terrible price for its tranquility; never does it see the miracle of growth; never does it feel the

motions of mounting life nor see the wonders of bursting seed nor the beauty of ripening grain. Fruit it can never know because it is afraid of the plow and the harrow. In direct opposite to this, the cultivated field has yielded itself to the adventure of living. The protecting fence has opened to admit the plow, and the plow has come as plows always come, practical, cruel, business-like and in a hurry. Peace has been shattered by the shouting farmer and the rattle of machinery. The field has felt the travail of change; it has been upset, turned over, bruised and broken, but its rewards come hard upon its labors. The seed shoots up into the daylight its miracle of life, curious, exploring the new world above it. All over the field the hand of God is at work in the age-old and ever renewed service of creation. New things are born, to grow, mature, and consummate the grand prophecy latent in the seed when it entered the ground.⁵

Tozer casts light on the glory afforded the sinner by Yahweh's miraculous hand concluding: "Nature's wonders follow the plow." The exile is God's hand upon the plow. What lay dormant is being awakened. What formerly lay under the surface, now is exposed and confessed. God's people will soon be prepared to receive the Seed and bear a harvest. If what can be known about God is plainly revealed in nature (Rom 1:19-20), then there is much to be learned, and committed to heart, in planting a garden. For the exiles, the gardens Yahweh has commanded they plant will be to them a daily reminder of the work Yahweh is performing in their hearts. This too will be a reminder of their small promise of Eden—their own shalom, promised them in their work of seeking the shalom of the city (Jer 29:7). Both the toil, and the fruit of the toil, are gifts from God (Eccl 3:12-13).

Verse 6

In verse six God instructs the Israelites to commit to His plan for family. The instruction to bear generations is a further call to commit to His chosen duration for their stay in Babylon. Here, Yahweh reaffirms that the Jews should not put off their normal way of life until they are able to return to Jerusalem, but should multiply in Babylon, treating the city as their home. The command to settle in for generations was to show by their commitment and "patience

32. ⁵A. W. Tozer, *Paths to Power: Living in the Spirit's Fullness* (Camp Hill, PA: Wingspread, 2002), 31-

that they were really penitent, and that they also expected [their salvation to come] in no other way than through God's favor alone."⁶

The message here is one that instructs the Jews that they should neither segregate, in a fortification mentality, nor should they assimilate to the Babylonian culture. It was not God's purpose for the Jews to set their hearts on Chaldea, or on the Chaldeans. On the contrary, they were to keep their return in mind, knowing they live for another kingdom, and as in the land of Israel restrict marriages to those of the same religious identity.

In Ezra and Nehemiah, after the Jews return to Jerusalem, the issue of intermarriage between Israelites and Babylonians is addressed, and those Israelites who have intermarried with Babylonians are called to separate from them. "The guilty are males who are presumably attempting to 'marry up' to exchange their low status of 'exiles' for participation in aristocratic society."⁷ This is both a selling out of their faith for worldly pursuits, and a threat to the maintenance of their minority witness in the presence of the larger Babylonian culture. "The increased consciousness of identity in a minority subculture thrown into extensive contact with other cultures [is] in such a social context, 'purity' [which] becomes the language of nonconformity."⁸ Thus it is vitally important that the Hebrews maintain their ethno-religious identity. As a caveat, the story of Ruth and Boaz indicates that the foreigner who denounces her country's idols to faithfully seek Yahweh, and the Israelite who benevolently receives the repentant foreigner, will share a God blessed union. The underlying principle is that the Jews were to be ever mindful of God's promises for their future. By honoring God's plan for family—fruitfully multiplying in the midst of the gentiles—the Israelites would demonstrate the better way of life. The people of God would demonstrate to their hedonistic neighbors that healthy families are the foundation of healthy society.

⁶Calvin, *Commentaries on Jeremiah*, 419.

⁷Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 160.

⁸*Ibid.*, 160.

Verse 7

A key focal point in Jeremiah's letter, verse seven calls the Israelites to commit to God's will by giving their lives for the welfare of the city. Yahweh says, "Seek the shalom of the city to which I have sent you, and in the city's shalom, you will find your shalom." This calls for a paradigm shift in Judah's view toward the gentiles. This verse "reflects the political realism, urging the exiles to accommodate their imperial overlord. [. . .] The well-being (shalom) of Judah is dependent upon and derivative that of Babylon. [. . .] The imperative bestows upon this vulnerable, small community a large missional responsibility."⁹ Here, Yahweh extends the Israelites His grace if only they will be willing to faithfully follow His direction in faith, and not reject the means by which He has instructed that they will find prosperity. This will require the Israelites to do justly, to seek justice, and to see God's image in gentile humanity. Seeing God's image in humanity, Yahweh desires that Israel will serve humanity, rather than attempt to establish dominion over humanity as if the gentiles are the subhuman beasts of the earth.¹⁰ Israel, by their relationship with Yahweh has an inherent sense of elitism. To love Babylon they will have to learn to genuinely love their neighbor. "Such a horizon prevents the exilic community from withdrawing into its own safe, sectarian existence, and gives it work to do and responsibility for the larger community."¹¹ In verse seven, God calls the Israelites to serve the common good, and not just the Judean good. Like instruments in a song, or as the sun and moon interact as they follow the laws of nature, God has called the Israelites to play their role in the harmony of His greater working of all things. Like the sun and moon, if the Israelites could obey their calling, God would use them to bring life to the world.

⁹Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 257-258.

¹⁰Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 267.

¹¹Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 258.

Section 2 - “Thus says the Lord”- Deny

Verse 8

The second section, cued by the statement “Thus says the Lord,” verses eight and nine contain a list of negative “deny this” commands that Yahweh gave the exiles for adherence to His will. The key take-away from this section is that God is calling His people to deny their fleshly desires, and to deny the false prophets who would tickle their ears with divinations about such hopes. Yahweh is calling His people to die to their wants, and align their hearts with His will. God says, “Do not listen to the prophets who prophesy your self-serving hopes and dreams. Deny them. I did not send them.”

Verse 9

Verses eight and nine are the direct response of Yahweh to the false prophets who were plotting to convince the Israelites to remain segregated from the Babylonians. Specifically mentioned in Jeremiah 28:3-4 is Hannaniah who was prophesying a return from exile in only two years. The desire of the false prophets and the religious leaders was that the Israelites would remain disengaged from the Babylonian culture, maintaining a strong tribalism as they held out for their return to Jerusalem. As many religious people do today, these diviners condemned the city’s culture and tried to find ways to encourage the Israelites to draw a hard line of segregation between themselves and their non-believing neighbors. The problem of the false prophets is seen earlier in chapters 23, 27, and 28 of Jeremiah. As Walter Brueggemann points out, the concern is that the Israelites, desiring an alternate outcome, are prone to chase flights of religious fancy. “The threat to the Jews is that they will be talked out of the reality of exile. [. . .] The warning of verses eight and nine is against an emotional, imaginative departure from that place. Prophetic faith is hard-nosed realism that is resistant to romantic, ideological escapism.”¹²

Yahweh denounces the separatist stance, and the religious fortification mentality, and eliminates any false hopes for this generation’s return to their former way of life. Yahweh calls

¹²Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 258.

the Israelites to deny such hopes for a return to former comfort, and to deny any search for an alternative plan for prosperity. This is a call to deny false prosperity teachings. God denounces the people's idolatry, and the people's religion. The city lacks for neither idolatry nor religion¹³, but demands people who adhere to the commands of Yahweh in verses four through seven. "The counsel to settle in exile (vv. 5-9) is against the popular notion that the Exile is short and temporary. The counsel to look beyond exile (vv. 10-14) is against the temptation to despair. Both affirmations from [Jeremiah] are in fact counter to prevailing opinion."¹⁴ Where verse seven calls the Israelites to give themselves entirely to the will of God, verse eight calls them to deny their own self-serving wants. Yahweh calls His people to come not as fallen man comes, seeking only for themselves the fleshly good and avoiding the fleshly undesirable; but to come as Christ came, only desiring to take away the bad, and to freely give for the common good.

Section 3 - "Thus says the Lord"- Behold

Verses 10 and 11

The third and final section, cued by the statement "Thus says the Lord," includes verses ten through fourteen, and contains God's promises for the Jewish exiles who embrace God's will and remain faithful through the exile. The removal of the Hebrews from Jerusalem bears no minor resemblance to Adam being excused from Eden, and such is the existence of all who live in rebellion, and have been excused from the presence of God. What follows in verses ten through fourteen is, "an assertion of the gospel: God is available in the midst of despair and will override both despair and the circumstances which generate it."¹⁵ The juxtaposition present between sections 4-9 and 10-14 demonstrate how the judgment and purpose of Yahweh are held

¹³Mark Driscoll, "A City in a City." Sermon, Jubilee Church, London, July 13, 2008.

¹⁴Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 260.

¹⁵Ibid., 259.

in tension.¹⁶ Present here are indications for a future hope through judgment. In an ancient world where a nation's gods were judged by military might, the Israelites would need a new understanding for why Yahweh would allow the conquering of His people. Through the prophets the Israelites would come to understand that while "it was no small trial when the Jews were deprived of the land that was God's dwelling place", and seemingly "all hope had been cut off", they were being led— "being chastened by God's hand."¹⁷ Beginning at Jeremiah 29:10, and expounded upon in the chapters that follow, are "some of the most wonderful promises in all of Scripture."

After twenty-eight chapters of gloom and doom, Jeremiah came bearing tidings of grace and glory. [. . .] He would love them 'with an everlasting love' (31:3) and 'turn their mourning into gladness' (31:13). He would make a new covenant with them (31:31) and give them 'singleness of heart and action' (33:29). God would even 'cleanse them from all the sin they have committed' (33:8). Jeremiah summarized all these blessings in one wonderful promise: 'For I know the plans I have for you' declares the Lord, (29:11) 'plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'¹⁸

In verses ten through fourteen God invites His people to behold the wonder of His goodness if they will only trust Him and live in light of His promises. "He will give them, not the expectations of their fears, nor the expectations of their fancies, but the expectations of their faith."¹⁹ In faith they should seek shalom for the city, and in faith they should seek Yahweh. In faithful execution they will find both.

Verse 12

Knowledge, service, and hospitality become wisdom, love, stewardship, and ministry when they flow from a constant acknowledgment of God's grace. Life becomes not just a temporal striving, a chasing after wind, and a preoccupation with the here and now; but a journey

¹⁶Ibid., 259.

¹⁷Calvin, *Commentaries on Jeremiah*, 432-433.

¹⁸P. G. Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 406-407.

¹⁹Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible complete and unabridged in one volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1285.

of service culminating in eternal shalom, when lived in communion with God. In verse 12, when the Lord's work in Babylon is complete, the Israelites will come to understand this, and understand that operating outside of a dependence on God's grace will always leave them short of where they desire to be. Then they will call on no one else, and they will depend on God alone. This desire of Yahweh is not merely for the sake of Yahweh, but also for the flourishing of mankind. In this God is glorified.

Verse 13

In verse thirteen God calls the Israelites to trust Him with their whole hearts, and their whole lives. "Yahweh had seemed to the exiles to be hidden, absent, and unavailable. Judah must reorient its life in exile. [. . .] Judah must only decide to seek its future exclusively from Yahweh."²⁰ They are to seek shalom even in the chaos and disorientation of displacement. No matter where they find themselves they will come to know their highest joy is found in obedience to God. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Pros 1:7). When the Israelites finally settle, and when they finally stop striving after all things other than God, they will still their weary hearts, and behold the wonder of God. Then they will have hearts fully devoted to God. Then they will seek God, and they will obey Him. Then they will know fortune, and prosperity, and shalom.

Verse 14

It is evident from Jeremiah's letter that, in his pro-Babylonian posture, he has addressed the letter to the people whom God intends to carry forth His plans for the future.²¹ "Those who remained in Jerusalem after the deportation of [597] continued to believe they were favored by God and regarded themselves as the blessed carriers of Judaism."²² What is impressed upon the exiles by the promises of Jeremiah's letter, however, is that the Judeans,

²⁰W. Brueggemann, 269.

²¹Ibid., 256.

²²Ibid., 260.

defeated and humiliated by the exile, are the true people of God—the carriers of Judah’s future. It is just like Yahweh, that through the humbling of men He is at work, shaping, chastening, developing, and bringing forth new life. John Bunyan put it well when he said, God’s people “in the fire of persecution [are] like Esther in the perfuming chamber”—being made “fit for the presence of the king.”²³ “As *exile* is Israel’s most devastating judgment, so homecoming and restoration to the land are Israel’s deepest yearning and God’s best gift.”²⁴ Just as the exile from Eden is the greatest judgment against mankind, the return of mankind to the kingdom of heaven is God’s greatest gift. Inherent in the judgment and promises of *Jeremiah’s Letter to the Exiles* is a helpful doctrine for every age. “God in a wonderful way gathers his church when scattered, to make it into one body, even though for a time he may obliterate its name and even its very appearance. Thus we see that this prophecy has not just been fulfilled once. God has often manifested the grace that is here set forth, and he still manifests it in gathering his church.”²⁵

The Theology of Continuing Exile

“In the exile the Hebrews become a stateless minority in the context of a massive empire, first under the Persians, then under the Hellenistic rule after Alexander, and finally under the Romans into the Common Era with Christianity.”²⁶ N. T. Wright, most notably among others, has argued that the first century Jews saw their existence under the rule of the Roman Empire as a continuation of the ongoing exile. Israelites in this time believed they were still living under divine punishment as they awaited the fulfillment of the promises of Isaiah 40-66. “In the common second-temple perception of its own period of history, most Jews of this period, it seems, would have answered the question ‘where are we?’ in language which, reduced to its

²³John Bunyan, *The Holy City, or: The New Jerusalem*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2015), 431.

²⁴Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 260.

²⁵Calvin, *Commentaries on Jeremiah*, 439.

²⁶Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 145.

simplest form, meant: we are still in exile. They believed that, in all the senses which mattered, Israel's exile was still in progress."²⁷ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher stakes a similar claim saying, "In later biblical thought, consciousness of being a 'certain people scattered and separated among the peoples is also evident in metaphors for Israel as the 'righteous remnant' [. . .] that suggest a minority consciousness."²⁸ "Part of the myth of Persian benevolence is the idea of an end to the exile in 539. But all that ended was Neo-Babylonian hegemony, to be replaced by that of the Persians. Ezra would point out, in his public prayer, that the Jewish people were 'slaves in our own land' under the Persians (Neh 9:36)." Smith-Christopher continues, "Post-exilic Hebrew writings like Daniel, would go so far as to reinterpret Jeremiah's predicted '70 years' into 490 years—effectively implying that the people were still in exile in the Persian and Hellenistic periods."²⁹ What is clear is that even after the return of the Jews from Babylon, Israel remained captive to foreigners and never regained status as an independent nation-state. While Israelites returned to Jerusalem, they remained exiles under the slavery of oppressive foreign empires.³⁰

N. T. Wright suggests that worse than foreign oppression, "Israel's god had not returned to Zion. [. . .] Israel clung to the promises that one day the Shekinah, the glorious presence of her god, would return at last."³¹ For four-hundred years, between the time of the building of the second temple, and the coming of John the Baptist, the Israelites did not hear an inspired word from the Lord. What is indicated is that "the exile is not yet really over. This perception of Israel's present condition was shared by writers across the board in second-temple Judaism. The exile, then, was not concluded at the Jews return to Jerusalem, nor was it

²⁷N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 268-269.

²⁸Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 145.

²⁹Ibid., 269.

³⁰Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 269.

³¹Ibid., 269.

completed in the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. Rather than seeing the restoration of a national past, the enslaved Jewish people were forced to form a new sociological existence with no political stronghold, instead becoming a purely religious community with an ethno-centric identity.³² During the 400 years of silence, the estrangement from Yahweh was felt by the Jews, and recorded when the author of 2 Maccabees wrote, “Gather together our scattered people. [. . .] Plant your people in your holy place, as Moses promised” (2 Maccabees 1:27-29).

When Jesus came announcing the forgiveness of sin and the coming of the kingdom of God, it is evident that the Jews identified Him as their political savior from exile. But rather than restore national Israel, Christ came to begin the rescue of the exiles from their estrangement from God. Christ releases the shackles of sin, beginning God’s people’s—the “elect exiles in the dispersion” (1 Pet 1:1)—sojourn to the “city with foundations whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). In this context, the exile of the Israelites to Babylon receives its proper recognition as the first pivot point in God’s redefinition of the geopolitical identity of His people. This shift finds its fulfillment in the great commission when Christ commands His followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28: 19). There is now no difference between Jew and gentile (Gal 3:28).

New Creation is the true Promised Land

“We have a natural affection for our native country; it strangely draws our minds; [. . .] and therefore if providence remove us to some other country, we must resolve to live easy there, to bring our mind to our condition, when our condition is not in everything to our mind. If the earth be the Lord’s, then, wherever a child of God goes, he does not go off his Father’s ground.”³³ As N. T. Wright explains, it is not as if Israelites were a national people and Christians are a non-territorial people. The strip of land in the Middle East is not God’s true Promised Land. Israel was a sign post marking God’s claim on the whole world. The children

³²Ibid., 269.

³³Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, 1284.

of Abraham, the seed who would inherit the land, are the people who are found in the Messiah (Gal 3:29). Creation will have its own Exodus, and in Christ, the people of God will inherit the true Promised Land—renewed creation itself. The Spirit is the down payment on that inheritance.³⁴ “In the midst of the nations, Israel will be a sign that it is possible to be a nation whose key characteristic is trust in the world’s invisible Maker—to use the biblical word, a culture defined by faith.”³⁵ In Romans 2:17-24 the Apostle Paul says that Israel was given for the salvation of the world, but under the Law, Israel completely failed in performing its salvific role—to be the light of the nations (Isa 49:6). Paul, referencing Isaiah 52, says, “The name of God is blasphemed among the gentiles because of [Israel].” “So God’s response to the ultimate cultural problem—a world full of mutually antagonistic nations entrenched in the self-provision and self-justification seen in Babel—is a fully cultural solution.”³⁶ In Babylon, God takes Israel out from under the wicker basket and says, “Now let your light shine before men.”

As the people of God, the elitist Israelites never fully grasped their identity in this calling. Between the exile and the time of Christ the Israelites are constantly faced with the question: If God has created the world for Israel, why does Israel continue to suffer? The answer is that the world is not merely given for Israel, but that Israel was also given for the world. “In terms of the first level of covenant purpose, the call of Israel has as its fundamental objective the rescue and restoration of the entire creation.”³⁷ The exile became the first step toward Israel receiving a more realistic view of herself. Israel is not “true humanity,” ordered to establish dominion over the subhuman nations. God’s people are given a priestly calling for salvation of the nations. The exile paves the way toward Yahweh’s people’s understanding of God’s plan for the world.

³⁴Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 268-271.

³⁵Andy Crouch, *Culture Making*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 126.

³⁶Ibid., 126.

³⁷Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 269.

Because Israel was unfaithful to her commission, keeping God's message of salvation to themselves, God resolved to send His Son, to be born an Israelite, and faithfully fulfill the Israel vocation. In this lineage, Christians are the continuation of *Spiritual Israel*, qualified in Christ to carry forward the New Covenant message of salvation to the world. Christ's work has been passed to the continuation of Israel (*Spiritual Israel*, the church), by Christ's sending the Spirit of God to dwell within believers.

God's covenant purpose, according to Wright, has first to do with "the divine intention to remake and restore whole world through Israel," and "second, with his intention to remake and restore Israel herself."³⁸ The greatest prophecies for the return from exile strongly affirm God's commitment to restore Israel. In Ezekiel 36, Yahweh says, "I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. [. . .] Then you shall live in the land I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." Israel understands then that sin has caused her exile, and the exile cannot be finished until her sin is forgiven. To this end, Christ entered the world. To the surprise of the Jewish people, Jesus did not free the Israelite captives from empirical oppression, but instead frees the faithful from the captivity of sin. Jesus did not end the physical exile of the Jews, but inaugurated a New Exodus. Leading followers through the waters of baptism, the *Greater Moses* now marches the enslaved out of captivity and into new life, inaugurating the new journey toward the new and restored kingdom of promise. The kingdom/exilic existence of *spiritual Israel* hinges at Jeremiah 29. The Babylonian exile results in the replacement of God's national people with God's faithful exiles. The Lord's people will not again be a gathered kingdom people until the consummation of the kingdom of heaven.

³⁸Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 268.

Application

The church's recognition of its identity as the continuation of Israel, and its exilic existence, provides the context for interpreting Jeremiah 29 today. The question becomes—particularly as the Western church transitions deeper into a post-Christian culture—“How do we sing our song in a strange land?” (Ps 137). As the church journeys through the *already but not yet*, Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles serves as a prescription text for *living in the world, but not of the world*. In *The City of God*, Augustine explains that the Bible provides the history of the world as a tale of two cities. The city of man and the city of God. “Babel/Babylon becomes in the Bible a *symbol* of self-restraint, imperialistic secularism; control without accountability to the Creator. [. . .] Isaiah saw this spirit in the imperial ambitions of Assyria and Babylon (Isa 10:7-11; 14:4-6; 47:5-7, 10).”³⁹ In Revelation 18, the Apostle John speaks of Rome and the kingdoms of the world to follow as Babylon, the great seducer of nations, and Peter too refers to Rome as Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13. In Augustine's view, *the city of God* is the church—the kingdom people of heaven—living in the world. Like the diaspora in Babylon, the church is a culture within the culture working for God's glory in the midst of a great and dark secular city scape.

Minister to the City

It remains no wonder that God, in Jeremiah 29:5, tells His exiles to settle in the metropolitan center of the Babylonian Empire. A brief survey of the missional strategy of the Apostles shows that God gave them too an affinity for the largest urban areas. Historically it is evident that culture is shaped by what happens within cities. This has become increasingly relevant to the church today. According to the 1790 U. S. census, ninety-five percent of the American population lived outside of urban areas.⁴⁰ The percentage of people living in urban areas by 1890 had grown to thirty-five percent. By 1990 approximately sixty-five percent of

³⁹Willem Van Gemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem*, (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 90.

⁴⁰Urban areas are defined as places with more than 2,500 persons.

Americans lived in an urban setting. The nation's urban population increased by another 12.1 percent from 2000 to 2010.⁴¹ The combination of the exile to Babylon, the missional strategy enacted in the book of Acts, and the rapid urbanization of America, are strong cause for a renewed focus on urban ministry. Despite the focus of much of Christian literature, poetry, paintings, and photography, the height of Christian contentment is not intended by God to be found in sprawling natural landscapes. "The center of God's creative delight is not a garden, but a city. [. . .] Somehow the city, the embodiment of concentrated human culture, has been transformed from the site of sin and judgment to the ultimate expression of grace, a gift coming 'down out of heaven from God' (Rev 21:2)."⁴² If we are to honor God's calling as exiles, the nations are to be reached, and this must begin with the city.

Exhibit Exile Posture

Jeremiah 29:5-7 is clear that exiles are to become citizens and contributors to the city. To be civil is to know how to act in the city. Aristotle said that the first type of bonding a person experiences in terms of kinship is with family. Kinship then extends to extended family, to friendship, and then the culmination of civility comes when a person learns to extend the bond of kinship to strangers. When a person can learn to love the stranger as family, they become a person of civility. Aristotle also said that a man without a city is not a man. He is either superhuman, or a beast.⁴³ This is not a calling to accommodate the secular world, but a call to engage in what Richard Mouw calls, "*convicted civility*."⁴⁴ Mouw's simple premise is that convictions and civility are not at odds. Christians require, not a change in calling, but a

⁴¹Statistics retrieved from "Urbanization of America," The USAonline.com, <http://www.theusaonline.com/people/urbanization.htm> (accessed March 28, 2015).

⁴²Crouch, *Culture Making*, 122.

⁴³Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 21, book 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), 224.

⁴⁴Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 9.

reevaluation of their approach to their calling. Further, Christians require a new view of their non-believing neighbors whom they are called to love. “Jeremiah’s life and prophesy is based on faithfulness and sacrificial love, which is a reflection of Jesus. God says, ‘I’m giving you over to them, put your faith and hope in me, and there will be life. This is not your home, but seek the peace and prosperity of your pagan neighbors and in it you will prosper.’”⁴⁵

Many theological views see the “post-exilic Hebrew history and literature as representing the period of sad decline and loss.”⁴⁶ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher contends that “the Jewish people is deserving of attention not only in the time when it displayed its power and enjoyed its independence, but as well in the period of its weakness and oppression during which it was compelled to purchase spiritual development by constant sacrifice of self.”⁴⁷ An exegetical view that sees the exile as more than merely a regrettable fate for Israel acknowledges that the exile forced the Israelites into the very positive formative act of learning what faithfulness to Yahweh looks like outside the borders of a theocracy. In the diaspora the exiles demonstrated that it is possible to be a faithful people outside a nation-state model, and outside a culture in which God’s people maintain political control. “For American Christians, the task will be the painful process of disengaging from the myths of the dominant ‘Christian nation’ that has so deeply corrupted a radical Christian witness in the world.”⁴⁸ Today, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Christian majority that has stood in the West as the socio-political order for nearly two millennia will not be the environment in which future Christians will live. Christians will draw increasingly closer to feeling the reality of exile. In an “attempted reassertion of political and social authority,” well-meaning but misguided Christians address this

⁴⁵Evan Koons, *For the Life of the World: Letters to the Exiles*. DVD. Directed by Eric Johnson and David Michael Phelps (Grand Rapids, Acton Institute, 2014) episode 1.

⁴⁶Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 192.

⁴⁷Ibid., 195.

⁴⁸Ibid, 194.

loss of power with a “crusading mentality,” and by “doing theology by megaphone.”⁴⁹ The circumstance requires the consideration of a striving for a more civil virtue. Christians must learn to develop a Christ-like language that speaks with, and not at sinners.⁵⁰ The post-exilic Scriptures hold many examples for emulation. Virtuous believers like Daniel, Mordecai, Esther, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, and Ezra demonstrated that the proverb is true: “He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend” (Prov 22:11). The key for the people of God is ‘purity of heart.’ In the posture of exile the Western church must do as its spiritual forefathers did before, and must submit its heart to the plow (Hos 10:12).

Exhibit Exile Action

Following the flow of Jeremiah’s prescription for the life of the exiles it can be clearly concluded in what ways God intends His people to be a blessing to the city. The first thing we understand about God is that, in the Trinity, He is communal. He pours Himself out in love and gives His life away as a gift to others—sinners, rebels, and pagans. In His image, God made man to give Himself away. In Jeremiah 29:6 it is made clear that the first step toward true civilization is family; and family starts with marriage. “When we [say] yes to marriage, we are saying yes to the life of the world. We are saying yes to the mystery ahead [. . .] new life. [. . .] Ultimately, saying yes to marriage is about living a life of offering. Marriage is a yes to your beloved, and you and your beloved saying yes to your family. Your family saying yes to the world.”⁵¹ Man is pointed outside himself, to his God, to his family, to his neighbor, and to his city. “Christian culture making [. . .] is a matter of community—a relatively small group of people whose common life is ordered by love. [. . .] It seems small besides the towers of Babel and Babylon. It is like a mustard seed, tiny and seemingly vulnerable. But it is the unseen truth

⁴⁹Ibid., 192.

⁵⁰Joseph C. Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-first Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 177.

⁵¹Amy Sherman, *For the Life of the World*, episode 2.

of the universe, the key to the whole story.”⁵² Like the Jews in Babylon it remains crucial that Christians not lose their faith identity in pursuing the love of neighbor. This begins with, and is not limited to, honoring the Bible’s command to restrict Christian marriages to New Covenant believers. Christians must strive to introduce non-believers to the gift of Christ Jesus, but limit marriage vows to those of faith. Unity in faith is sacred, and that unity must begin in the home and work outward. Healthy family is the foundation of healthy society.

Jeremiah 29:7 could not be clearer that God’s purpose for His people is that they should give and not take. Most people live in the city because of the abundant amenities the city offers them. *Spiritual Israel* (the church), is God’s gift to the world. The world is not merely God’s gift to the church—Christ is God’s gift to the church. In the image of God, it is the nature of God’s people to give. Work cannot merely be about oneself, but must serve the needs and wants of others. The righteous person should give freely, and strive to take no more for themselves than what is needed. In God’s image people are makers and creators. Gifts are given by God to be shared and to be stewarded. A mentor transfers wisdom for the sake of unlocking potential in another. This is the stewardship of the gift of knowledge. When knowledge is shared, communities thrive. In like manner, discipleship transfers faith and pays forward the fruit of raising disciples who make disciples, advancing the kingdom of heaven. Work too is a God given gift to be stewarded. Through vocation a person discovers their callings, and in vocation a person creates the goods and services that benefit people for the greater good. The fruit of work is not merely the products, but relationships. The fruit of a Christian’s labor is ultimately fellowship, community, and relationship. More than just consumable products, business creates an economy of community and meets that community’s needs.⁵³ This has been evidenced in society in the justice system, medical system, education system, welfare system,

⁵²Crouch, *Culture Making*, 248.

⁵³Stephen Grabill, *For the Life of the World*, episode 3.

etc. All of these constructs are imperfect but faithful strivings to apply faith, wisdom, and love, for the advancement of the city's people, for the glory of God.

A person who consistently seeks God's will and has a concern for the things that concern God will not easily be led astray by false prosperity teachings like those in Jeremiah 29:8-9. Christians should not idolatry ease, comfort, and material wishes in denial of the will of God for the good of their souls and the care of others. If Christians are to be about the welfare of others, they must make sacrifices and cease neglecting to love the stranger, the sojourner, the outcast, the poor, the orphaned, and the widowed. As a people who gives, rather than takes, Christians must make space for these people in their lives, budgets, and homes, remembering that while we were strangers, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). Because Christ commands His followers, Christ is in His followers, and Christ is glorified by His followers. Life is not meant to be inwardly focused or to be lived for self. The life that terminates on the self is a life that truly fails to live at all because it is a life that only deeply knows one very small sampling of the many billions of beautiful creations and experiences God has made for His children's concern and wonder.

Christ followers should live from a position of awe, beholding God's beauty and His goodness. In Jeremiah 29:11-14 God has told the Israelites He is for their good. God makes similar promises, specifically relevant to Christ followers, in Romans 8:28-32. Living in light of God's promises and His gifts—as kingdom heirs—God's people will rediscover their humanity and who God has created them to be. The Christian who finds joy in the will of God will have their fortunes restored in flourishing in their own personal shalom.

What does it look like to live in the awe of God and to steward one's life and gifts for the glory of Christ and the life of others? Gerard Manley Hopkins, who as a young man struggled with homoerotic thoughts, and suffered a lifelong affliction with what is today called

bipolar disorder⁵⁴, paints a glorious picture. “What I do is me: for that I came. I say more, the just man justices; keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces; acts what in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is – Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not His; to the Father through features of men’s faces.”⁵⁵ This is the personified and active beauty of the Christian sojourner’s work, empowered by the grace of Christ. As Shakespeare said, “To thine own self be true.” This is by no means to say, “Be selfish,” or “Follow your heart” (Jer 17:9); but it is to say that each of God’s children is endowed, nay embedded, with unique and certain gifts for stewarding back to God in service of the Father and concern for fellow man. A Christian is to recognize their gift and honor the stewardship of that gift. Hopkins gave his life and his sin to God, and in turn was led to the priesthood and to celibacy. By God’s grace he came to understand his gift was in keeping a literary treasury of the Creator’s majesty—communicating the beauty of God in an aesthetic theology he observed in all things seen, and in the awesomeness of relationship with the Unseeable. This was his gift and his calling. Using his calling he has summed up the calling of every Christian. Every Christian should do what the Father has gifted them to do, and they should do it with all their might, for the welfare of the *city of man* to the glory of God. As the Body of Christ, Christians are the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Christian lives are for His service and to His glory. If Christ be in a person, their desire to actively engage the calling to steward their God-given gifts should be no less natural than breathing.

Like the Judean exiles in Jeremiah 29:11-14, “we are called to abide in God and say, ‘Let it be to His plan for our part in His divine and wondrous mystery.’ We can be assured that God’s desire for our work is a mighty collaboration, not only with our Creator, but the entire world. In this broken world we have a responsibility to bring healing and harmony to our most

⁵⁴Paddy Kitchen, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978).

⁵⁵Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, “34. As Kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame” (London: Penguin Classics, 1953), 51.

immediate surroundings, and work outward. By these actions we too are healed.”⁵⁶ Let us not deny our exile, accepting this place as home. Let us not live for the now. Let us not resist the plow. Let us not allow the potential work of our gifts to go unrealized, or our lives to terminate on self. Let us follow God where He leads us, settle there, and give every ounce of our lives. Let us be like Christ, and be poured out as a gift in the *city of man* – for the love of our neighbor, for the welfare of the city, and for the life of the world; so that in this all the glory may be God’s; forever. Amen.

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⁵⁶Evan Koons, *For the Life of the World*, episode 7.

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