

The Aftermath of Desolation – Exile, Captivity and Restoration

I. Introduction

1. The sacking of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. brought David's house and kingdom to their end. *And yet the Lord's prophets – both before and after Jerusalem's fall – insisted that He remained committed to His covenant with David, and so also His covenant with Abraham.*
2. While the two kingdoms remained, the prophets uniformly warned of coming judgment and desolation, even while pleading with Yahweh's people to return to Him. And after desolation and exile had come, His prophets reminded their hearers that their plight was their own doing, and yet He would remain faithful; exile and captivity would not be the last word.

II. The Centrality of Exile in the Salvation History

A. Exile as the Creation's Condition

1. Exile is the fundamental theme for understanding the creation since the fall, for exile has to do with a thing's separation from its proper (lawful) physical and/or relational sphere or habitation. *In biblical terms, exile is a **relational** phenomenon, and that in two respects:*
 - a. First, by divine design everything in the created order is related to everything else, so that exile involves inter-creational alienation.
 - b. But the relationships that exist between created entities are grounded in the fundamental relationship that exists between every created thing and its Creator. *So, for instance, human beings are inherently related to one another, but as image-bearers, so that the intra-human relationship is defined and ordered by, and functions within, people's relationship with the God whose image they bear.*
2. These two dimensions of exile are explicit in the Genesis creation/fall account. Man was created image-son for the purpose of mediating God's relationship with His creation. *This means that the intimacy between the Creator and His creation exists and operates through humans fulfilling their own created design and function as kings and priests on God's behalf. Thus the Scripture treats the Fall in terms of relational alienation, not failed morality.*
 - a. Man is now alienated from God, expressed in his severance from God's life and his exile from God's garden-sanctuary.
 - b. And because man is the interface between God and His creation, *divine-human* estrangement results in *Creator-creation* and *human-creation* estrangement. In scriptural terms, the fall left the creation *cursed*: severed (exiled) from its intended design as alienated from both its Creator and the human lord created to administer its relationship with the Creator. * cf. Gen. 3:17-19 with Rom. 8:18-22
3. The Fall introduced the theme of exile – the fracturing of Creator-creation relationship at all levels, and the rest of the salvation history focuses on remedying this circumstance. And because this fracturing of the Creator-creation relationship leaves creatures severed from their own true nature and function, *which severance the Scripture calls death*, it follows that death is the consequence of exile. **Hence the Scriptural preoccupation with ending the creation's exile is its preoccupation with life out of death.**

B. The Manifestations and Progress of Exile

1. Expulsion from Eden was the first and foundational manifestation of exile, but it was quickly followed by a second one, namely the **Flood**. For that episode involved God remedying the creation's *disorder* by reducing it again to *non-order* under a watery "deep" (Gen. 1:2) and then reordering it in a kind of second creation (cf. Gen. 1:24-30, 9:1-7). The deluge addressed the creation's estrangement (exile) by purging it and reordering its relationship with the Creator, with man, the image-bearer, at the center – but only provisionally.
2. The **Babel** episode followed and represented man's attempt to end his exile, first at the human level by seeking human unity, but in order that unified mankind should make a name for itself and ascend into the very presence of God. God's response was two-fold: *He first exposed and condemned this design, and then chose out of the human race a particular man (Abram) through whom He would reunify mankind and restore the divine-human relationship, with the ultimate goal that the creation would be freed from its exile.*
3. Centuries later Abraham's descendents (echoing their forefathers' own personal exiles from Canaan – Gen. 12:10, 27:41-28:5) found themselves in exile in **Egypt**, and their deliverance and restoration to the Creator-God became the great prototype of the final deliverance by which the creation's exile (with man at the center) would be remedied forever.
4. Yahweh delivered His covenant people from their exile in Egypt and brought them into His sanctuary land to dwell with Him as He had pledged to Abraham (ref. Gen. 15:12-21; Exod. 15:17-18). *He ended their physical exile, but their essential exile – their estrangement from Him – remained unresolved.* Israel remained exiled from its God, though He was present in their midst, and this alienation showed itself repeatedly through the **era of the Judges**. The hearts of Yahweh's children continued to be far from Him, underscored through a series of cycles marked by disregard, apostasy, retribution, repentance and restoration. And Israel's alienation from their God expressed itself in a destructive alienation from one another.
5. The covenant household continued in exile, evident in their relationship with their God and with one another, until it eventually manifested itself in **two national phenomena**: *two factions of the Abrahamic people exiled from one another in the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the exile of both kingdoms from the covenant land.* As with the previous exile episodes, these circumstances reflected Israel's relational exile from their God, underscored by Yahweh's departure from His sanctuary before Judah's destruction. * Ezek. 10-11, 24

Though the Lord had warned His covenant children of this outcome before they even entered Canaan as their promised inheritance (Deut. 28-29), and though He'd continually exhorted them while in Canaan to return to Him under the threat of desolation and expulsion, exile from the land was inevitable; *relational exile ensured physical exile. In the end, the people God chose as His agents for ending the creation's exile were themselves hopelessly subject to it. Adam and Eve's exile from Eden was their exile, and they could not resolve that.*

C. Redemption as the Remedy for Exile

1. Exile involves displacement from one's proper sphere or place of inhabitation, and in its biblical expression, exile is an *imposed* and *enforced* circumstance. That is to say, it isn't willingly chosen and it involves some form of forcible constraint. Even in the case of the patriarchs and their families, their personal exile from Canaan was imposed on them by compelling circumstances pressed upon them. * ref. Gen. 12:10, 26:1, 27:41-28:5, 42:1-5

Those circumstances drove them from their homeland, but also prevented them from returning. In that sense, exile involves some sort of restraint, so that remedying it involves *liberation*; a person must be freed from what prevents his return to his rightful habitation.

2. Thus the Scripture presents *redemption* as the remedy for exile, and the Egyptian Exodus served as the singular example of this. Christians often regard redemption as synonymous with atonement, but redemption refers to liberation from constraint through payment of an appropriate price or valuation by a suitable intercessor (Hebrew *paddah, kaphar, gaal*). In the case of Israel's redemption from Egypt, the price of Israel's release was the shattering of Egypt's enslaving power, which "price" Yahweh paid by the triumph of His own might.

And because exile (in its scriptural form) expresses *relational* alienation, redemption is unto *reconciliation*. So the Egyptian redemption was unto Israel's ingathering; Yahweh liberated His people to bring them to Himself so that He could dwell among them as He pledged to Abraham (Exod. 15:17-18, 25:1-8). As long as exile continued, the covenant could not be fulfilled, and only Yahweh's redeeming hand could liberate Israel from its bondage and gather them back to His sanctuary land. * Exod. 3:1-10, 6:1-8

3. Redemption resolves exile, and this was the case in every instance of exile in Israel's history, *whether outside or inside the covenant land*. For when Israel was repeatedly subjugated by Canaanite powers during the era of the Judges, Yahweh raised up liberators (judges) – redeemers who overcame the oppressors and led the nation back to their God. So it was with Cyrus, whom the Lord appointed to redress the Babylonian and Assyrian captivities.
4. Physical captivity and exile (inside or outside the land) characterized Israel's long history and reflected and underscored the nation's relational exile from its God. And if physical exile contradicted the covenant promises and hindered their fulfillment, Israel's *relational* exile absolutely precluded that fulfillment. *Thus the enduring hope of Abraham's household – a hope that Yahweh Himself inspired and nurtured through His own affirmations – was that a day was coming when their covenant God would arise and redeem them from their essential exile and its bondage, namely their enslaving alienation from Him.*

Restoration to Judea from the Babylonian *diaspora* spoke to that day, as it demonstrated Yahweh's abiding commitment to His promise (Hag. 2:1-9). But liberated exiles dwelling again in Jerusalem with a rebuilt temple wouldn't fulfill His pledge to Abraham and David, painfully evident in the conspicuously empty sanctuary and David's throne being occupied by a succession of Gentile rulers. *No, Israel's exile – indeed, the creation's exile – wouldn't end until Yahweh delivered them all from the ultimate power that held them captive.*

5. Cyrus was the Lord's *mashiach* (his anointed regal deliverer), chosen to redress the Babylonian captivity and rebuild the temple and city (Isa. 44-45), but he was impotent to overcome the invincible power that kept Israel (and the creation) captive and exiled from the Creator-Lord. Liberation from that bondage would demand another *mashiach* – a redeemer who would exercise Yahweh's own supreme liberating power, just as Moses had done centuries earlier (Isa. 59:1-60:3). This redeemer would free the entire creation from its bondage by addressing human alienation, thus bringing true liberation and return through forgiveness and reconciliation. Then, at last, Yahweh would return to His sanctuary and administer His rule in the earth through His ordained king, the regal son promised to David.

*This was Israel's hope and longing, grounded in their God, proclaimed as "good news" in Jesus of Nazareth, and accomplished in the great Exodus of Calvary. * Isa. 51-55; Luke 22; John 13-18*