

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ISRAEL'S EXILE
HISTORICALLY EMOTIONALLY SPIRITUALLY WITH AN EMPHASIS ON EMOTIONAL TRAUMA
PSALM 137: 1-9**

**SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR KAY APIGO
OT504: THE HEBREW BIBLE & THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN WORLD**

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APRIL 26, 2022**

1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. 2 We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. 3 For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. 4 How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land? 5 If I forget thee, Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. 6 If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth. if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy. 7 Remember, LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem, who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof. 8 O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed, happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. 9 Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

INTRODUCTION

This research aims to examine the impact of Israel's exile historically, emotionally, and spiritually. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Some events precipitated Israel's downward spiral. The brief answer is sin, however, historically they were disobedient to God's law. Some background would help to understand the relationship between Jehovah and Israel. According to Genesis 15-17, Israel was God's covenant people. A covenant according to Webster's dictionary is a contract. This means it is a legally binding agreement between two parties. However, it differs from a contract in that it involves a relationship. One can enter into a contract and not like the person because the contract is a binding agreement. A covenant is different because it's based on a relationship. In his article 'Israel's Covenant (Un)Faithfulness' Biola University professor Isaac D. Blois suggests that "Israel's past has

instilled in her neighbors a sense of respect and awe for this unique nation to which God has spoken from out of the fire.” Professor John H Walton of Wheaton College states:

“Unlike the ancient Near Eastern cultures where humans existed to care for the gods (Great Symbiosis), Jehovah wanted to have a relationship with his people.”¹

However, Israel learned that there were consequences when covenant agreements were broken.

Historically

What precipitated the events of Israel’s exile? John H. Walton professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College states, “One of the things that permeated the ancient Near Eastern culture was how deity was the cause and effect of history. In the ancient world, God was the cause and effect, and he was the driving force of history”. According to S. Parker:

“It is the covenant that stands at the center of Israel’s unique historiography. The covenant was the foundation of God’s activities in the past as well as for the future, and it, therefore, offered the defining paradigm for action in the present.”²

Because Israel had broken her covenant agreement with Jehovah the result was exile. The first, covenantal agreement broken by Israel that resulted in her exile was a refusal to follow all of God’s law. There was a failure of the priest to teach God’s word. The theme that underlines

¹ John H Walton, “Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 102.

²Simon B Parker, “Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions” (Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

the book of Judges is that “People did that which is right in their own eyes” (Jdg-17:5, 21:25).

E.P. Pusey writes:

“The priests were charged with the responsibility of teaching the Torah. Whatever revelation had been received, whatever instruction of God was available, it was the responsibility of the priests to impart it to the people. The people and priests were not excused because they erred. The principle of sin and retribution is operative in the lives of both religious leaders and people.”³

One has to also recognize that the ancient Near Eastern culture also viewed covenants differently. J. H. Walston states:

“The only real distinction between these covenants and other extant Ancient Near Eastern covenants is that the witnesses are not a collection of gods but God himself, who is also one of the parties to the covenant.”⁴

Secondly, their worship of other gods resulted in the curse of the covenant. In Deuteronomy 9 Moses warns the second generation not to make the same mistake as the first generation when they worshiped the golden calf. Hosea 13:6 warns Israel that their failure to heed Deuteronomy 9 would result in certain judgment. Finally, exile came because they would not allow the land to rest. Exodus 23:10 says that nothing shall be planted in the seventh year. God in

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E. B. Pusey, “The Minor Prophets” A Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956), 47.

⁴J.H. Walton, “Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 95.

his wisdom understood that planting crops every year would eventually deplete the land. As a result, historically they were exiled and instead of a covenantal blessing they would experience a curse. Peter M Head professor at Cambridge University states:

“Israel's occupation of the land would be taken away in an act of judgment and their health, peace, prosperity, numbers, and status would all be relinquished in the exile and scattering among the nations.”⁵

However, Jehovah's act of judgment will never minimize his love for Israel. Future restoration of Israel will restore her covenantal relationship with God, and once more the people will be re-gathered, and God will dwell with his people.

EMOTIONALLY

The impact of people being enslaved and displaced can have generational consequences. First, a definition is important. The American psychiatrist and founder Vamik Volkan of International Dialogue Initiative defines transgenerational trauma as: “when the experiences of parents affect the development of their children, grandchildren, and generations, biologically, socially, mentally, or emotionally”. Psalm 137 speaks of the deep-seated issues of a displaced people group. For example, their weeping. They can't sing, miss their homeland, and want their captors and those responsible to be judged by God. This trauma of being snatched out of

⁵Peter M. Head, “Curse of Covenant Reversal” Churchman 111 no (Feb 1997): 225.

their land and taken by force to another land according to Vamik Volkan is called 'chosen trauma and he defines it as:

“The collective mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to face drastic common losses, to feel helpless and victimized by another group, and to share a humiliating injury”. A mourning process can also occur at a collective level. In collective mourning, historical symbols, songs, memorials, or rituals allow mourners to share consciously or unconsciously in the trauma of their ancestors.”⁶

When people internalize trauma without dealing with the effects, they carry the stress and the pressure to hide any sign of weakness for generations. “These buried emotions, coupled with lack of access to mental health resources leave many at high risk for severe psychological distress. Some tragedies and crimes that often result in intergenerational trauma include, violent crimes, assault, harassment, rape, sexual abuse, genocide, and acts of war.”⁷ As an African American, I still feel the pain and suffering of my ancestors and what they endured as they were snatched from their homeland. J. Deotis Robert writes:

“The evil of slavery was transnational. The shadow of slavery still hangs over us, especially in the United States. Slavery and its tragic consequences still linger in the personal psyche and collective memory of nations like Brazil and the United States. Their position is one

⁶Vamik D, Volkan “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen” (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 546.

⁷ Volkan, 547.

of lost consciousness and lost memory. But such gross evil as slavery is best removed by repentance and efforts to right the injustices associated with this gross inhumanity. Unless such crimes of history as Slavery, the Holocaust, and Japanese internment camps are remembered there is the frightful possibility they may be repeated. God forbid that this should happen.”⁸

Intergenerational trauma had a devastating effect on Israel’s exiles according to Psalm 137. Some will say it happen because of their disobedience. Yes, that is true but because of God’s covenant love (kheh'-sed) for his covenant people he will reverse the curse and restore Israel.

Spiritually

From a promising past to a disastrous present, what happened to the nation of Israel? From a conquering nation with God as their leader, how could they have fallen to nations that worshipped idols of gold and silver? Simply put, they did not live up to the covenant promises that God gave them. As a result, they lost their moral direction. W. J. Harrelson writes:

“The cheating of persons in business, the befouling of family relations, the corruption of justice in the courts, acts of violence are signs that the LORD is certain to bring an early end to Israel's life because so much depends upon Israel's being a firm and clear model of public

⁸Roberts, J Deotis. “Slavery in the Americas: Economic, Cultural and Religious Consequences” Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center 19 (Fall – Spr. 1991 – 1992), 121.

righteousness before the nations.”⁹

Not only did Israel lose her moral compass but she also lost the Promised Land. God’s promise in Genesis 12 was to bless Abraham and his descendants. However, in Deuteronomy 28:63 God promises to bring Israel to ruin and pluck her out of the land because she did not obey the covenant.

Finally, Israel lost the presence of Jehovah in her midst. Judgment involved the scattering of the nation and serving foreign gods. Ironically, Jehovah had called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees only for his descendants to end back in the idolatrous nations from which he had come. But this is not the end of the story. Judgment is not only punitive, but it is also, redemptive. Israel would eventually return to the land but not as a kingdom united. God will restore Israel even as a remnant. When the prophet Elisha thought he was the only one serving God, he reminded the prophet Elisha that there were seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal (I Ki-19:18).

Conclusion

The effects the exile had on the nation of Israel historically, emotionally, and spiritually were devastating. Sin was the underlying reason or the reason behind the scenes that determined why Israel lost her covenant relationship with God. Unlike the ancient Near Eastern

⁹ W. J. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments, and Human Rights* Philadelphia (Fortress Press, 1980), 27.

culture where people were created to serve the gods. Israel's relationship was different because their Deity wanted a relationship and not just service. God's covenant requirements were broken which resulted in a curse rather than a blessing.

The emotional trauma of their exile would reverberate for generations. This is just how divorce not only affects the husband and wife but the children, relatives, friends, and even how the culture views divorcees. The emotional trauma can also result in acts of harassment, assault and even violence because 'hurt people' hurt people.

Spiritually, Israel's constant rebellion against God's covenant agreements led to Israel's exile and scattering among the nations. Pete M. Head states:

"The blessings promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, blessings enjoyed in part or whole during Israel's occupation of the land, would be taken away in an act of judgment because Israel failed to maintain exclusive covenant loyalty to YHWH. Israel's health, peace, property, prosperity, numbers, and status would all be relinquished in the exile and scattering among the nations."¹⁰

According to Revelation 21:12 ", the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are written on the twelve gates". God will not forsake his covenant people because the promise is unconditional. Consequently, he will restore them to the land and give them prosperity,

¹⁰ Head, 226

peace, and health in the new covenant through Jesus Christ.

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