

OUT OF BABYLON

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Time In Babylon

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER 4

THE DIVINE AS THE POETIC

Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

The displacement of leading members of Jerusalem society to Babylon might have ended in despair. There was ample reason to conclude that YHWH's promises were exhausted and hope was spent: "So I say, 'Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the LORD'" (Lamentations 3:18).

That, however, is not what happened. In the very midst of such a seemingly hopeless situation, new hope was voiced. New promises were uttered. New poems were offered that alleged to be YHWH's very own commitment to the future of Jerusalem and its erstwhile inhabitants. Thus the divine resolve to bring the deportees home came to be a vigorous assertion and shaping conviction within the exilic community. No reason is given for

such a hope, except that it was taken to be grounded in YHWH's own resolve.

In contemporary United States culture, it is not yet clear how such an emergence of hope might occur. It is certain that the old, tired imperial ideology to which much corporate wealth and much military power is committed cannot yield such possibility. Mostly in the midst of societal disarray what we get is moralistic or ideological posturing. Neither of these can amount to a possible newness outside the categories of what is old and failed. There are, to be sure, voices of hope. None of these are more powerful or compelling than the "I Have a Dream" of Martin Luther King, Jr. But such "dreaming" must perforce be grounded well beyond business as usual, and it is only the "local tradition" of faith that dares to speak in this way. Perhaps it is the case that a hope-filled future for our society depends upon the courage and freedom of the local tradition to speak beyond accepted categories for the sake of grace-filled newness. There is a "plan," perhaps, beyond our conventional possibilities. That "plan," however, requires "seeking with all your heart." Such a practice in a weary culture will at best be odd. But its oddness does not make it impossible.

In the sixth century, Jews, as displaced persons, lived with and under the pressure of Babylon. Some lived in Babylon and some were scattered elsewhere; many continued to live in the homeland. But all were to some extent displaced by the imposing insistent power of the empire.

In this season of displacement, we do not know what all the Jews did, though we know that they were admonished to settle in, to build houses, to plant gardens, and to marry off their young (Jeremiah 29:5-6). No doubt they went about their economic business, coming to terms with Babylonian reality in a variety of ways. But we also know, as indicated in the previous chapter, that they grieved over what had been lost:

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion. (Psalm 137:1)

And they continued well into the next century to grieve over what had been lost:

They replied, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire." When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:3-4)

They cried out in their need, even as their ancient ancestors had "cried out" in their distress (Exodus 2:23). Their crying had been framed by the resilient memory they had of poetry they had heard. It was *unwelcome poetry* that they remembered, poetry from Amos and Micah and Isaiah and Jeremiah, lining out in anticipation the loss and devastation to come. That poetry had preceded the empire. That poetry had spoken of the empire only incidentally, because its true subject was YHWH, who uttered words of disappointment concerning Israel and consequently words of threat. The season of disappointment gave the displaced a long time to remember and to ponder that poetry of anticipated loss. The sense of displacement gave time to collect and order such poetry into coherent patterns that were on the way to canon. But mostly they listened—again and again—to the cadences of divine disappointment and alienation that sounded a steady beat of loss. The poetry was old; but its effect was to create a contemporary context for lament. The lamentation was the *human response of Israel to the divine poetry of alienation*. The poetry was true, it turned out, and so the grief was loud and deep.

The local tradition of the *poetry of alienation and response in grief* is so characteristically Jewish. It yields the prophetic and the liturgical voice of the sixth-century crisis of abandonment. It is a quite distinctive and treasured local tradition that shaped lived

reality in a particular way. To appreciate fully that local tradition of prophetic poetry and liturgical response, we should contrast it with the empire's own liturgy. The empire's liturgy was all doxology, all praise, all celebration, all self-affirmation, and all victorious confidence. The empire had no room for sadness, loss, or grief. Unwelcome poetry never found voice in the empire, for the poets of unwelcome were all silenced. The empire permitted no cry, expected no response, engaged in no dialogue, offered no ultimate holiness . . . and so practiced an unrecognized despair and an uninterrupted denial.

One can imagine, then, two parallel liturgies. On the one hand, the imperial liturgy was about unthinking affirmation. On the other hand, Jewish local tradition's practice hosted unwelcome poems and unsilenced cries of need as a response to real or anticipated loss. The issue for displaced Jews is whether they could sustain the theological tradition about which they sat down and wept. In the local tradition the ultimate reality of God and the immediate reality of loss grappled with each other. "But," the Jews asked themselves, "should we abandon the local tradition in order to settle down to life in the empire?" That, of course, is always the question for this (and any other) local tradition: whether to relinquish or retain, whether to accommodate or resist, whether to give one's self over to hegemony's buoyant self-delusions or to live in contradiction to that buoyancy. It was an acute question for those displaced Jews, even as now the same question faces the church in the midst of empire. The question never receives a final or a simple answer. The issue is always under negotiation and review; the local tradition is always repositioning itself and, at the same time, always being imposed upon by the force of the empire. So it must have been among Jews in Babylon, hearing always again the refrain of the unwelcome poetry of divine disappointment, always again responding in grief, always again refusing to give up on that ancient rootage.

And there, in the midst of the “always again,” there came a new poetry that bears all the mark of *welcome*. It is, in this case, an inexplicable wonder that the community of local tradition that keeps hearing the old poetry of unwelcome is gifted by new poetry that sounds in a fresh cadence. It is a wonder beyond explanation. Sooner or later the empire might have caused the poetry of the local tradition to evaporate—but it did not happen that way. Rather, all the coercive force of empire is said to become the seedbed and venue for new poetry that was heard among Jews as a voice, and therefore as the presence, of God, the God who has refused to abandon the displaced. It may be that the new poetry of welcome,

- is to be understood as raw human hope that in resilience just would not give in;
- is to be understood as evidence of the ideological force of those who dominated sixth-century Jewish imagination, who imposed the notion of “return and restoration” on a community that would otherwise have settled for a new home in empire;
- is finally to be taken as the gift of YHWH’s own resolve for the future that stands against the facts on the ground.

Whether raw human hope, or ideologically led, or divinely appointed—or all of the above—the new poetry of welcome becomes the ground for a fresh future. Surely it would not have happened to a community that had quit on its own imaginative discourse for the sake of the flat, one-dimensional, coercive prose of the empire. That new poetry—however it is generated—reached some with open ears, precisely the ones who had groaned most candidly. Presumably the poetry could not have reached those who had given up on rootage and who freely and willingly adapted to a new imperial reality. The local tradition culminates in a readiness for a time of new poetry. And when it is uttered, it is heard as a forceful assurance that exile is the habitat of the holy, and that the

empire has not been able—for all its effort—to eliminate YHWH as the definitive player in the shape of the future.

Thus we may ponder what it is like for the children of the local tradition to hear poetry of welcome amid the prosaic control of the empire. This poetry moves boldly in images and metaphors out beyond the imperial world. It takes up old treasured, trusted themes and voices them in contemporary idiom.¹ It dares to suggest that another reality exists beyond the empire’s control. It invites new social possibility. It mocks the empire that they had come to trust and fear too much. And it does so because at the center of this poetry, the alleged speaker of new possibility is none other than YHWH, whom the empire could neither silence nor domesticate. Simply by being spoken and heard, the poetry creates a new social freedom. It imagines otherwise; it invites its listeners to walk boldly into the world it creates. It authorizes courage, summons defiance, and lines out resistance, all in the interest of legitimating the compelling force of the local tradition.

As we are able to imagine what it was like to hear such poetry, so we may wonder what it is like to utter it. Taken humanly, the voices we can identify must have been seized by a restless passion that surged against their own prudence.² But I refer not to the human utterer, but rather to the divine utterer of this poetry. For this rhetoric is from none other than the lips of YHWH! It is in the character of YHWH to give voice to poetic cadence. Poetic form is indispensable for speech that matches YHWH’s own restless freedom.³ Sometimes, to be sure, the tradition exhibits YHWH slowed to memo and rule and syllogism—but not mostly.⁴ Mostly YHWH, in poetic utterance, authorizes candor and sounds grief and issues hope that opens to new possibility. In the prophetic poetry YHWH seeks to penetrate the fearful anxiety of Israel, to energize by defying the given and disturbing the presumed world in which the listeners lived. YHWH knows, always knows, that the empire is penultimate; its time will pass.⁵ YHWH’s words anticipate a future for Israel beyond the empire. As a consequence, Jewish life in

Babylon, local tradition in empire, is voiced in revelatory, defiant, anticipatory terms that the empire can neither silence nor contain. In what follows I will consider in turn (a) the three great poetic voices of exile, (b) the political connections of these voices of poetry, and (c) narrative counterpoints to the three bearers of poetry. The sum of this analysis will be concerned with the canon; fixed through exilic poetic daring, it provides steady ground for local tradition against every confiscation or reductionism.

A. THREE WAVES OF POETRY

1. Ezekiel

The prophet Ezekiel, for the most part, does not write poetry. His work, however, is powerfully imaginative and in any case moves well beyond conventional prose. I take his visionary work as poetry because he invites his listeners—readers—to entertain a world of possibility out beyond “the given.” As he has “imagined” the destruction of Jerusalem, so he takes the lead, among the displaced, in imagining a future. Here I will comment on a series of representative texts that exhibit the art of “listening to poetry” as a way of survival amid Babylonian pressure.

First, the poet Ezekiel delivers poetic scenarios toward those who have been the great adversaries of Jerusalem. Of Tyre (who wished Jerusalem ill) he writes,

See, I am against You, O Tyre!
 I will hurl many nations against you,
 as the sea hurls its waves.
 They shall destroy the walls of Tyre
 and break down its towers.
 I will scrape its soil from it
 and make it a bare rock.
 It shall become, in the midst of the sea,

a place for spreading nets.
 I have spoken, says the Lord GOD.
 It shall become plunder for the nations,
 and its daughter-towns in the country
 shall be killed by the sword.
 Then they shall know that I am the LORD.
 (Ezekiel 26:3-6; see 28:6-10)

In the poem YHWH takes active initiative to exercise sovereignty over the geopolitical scene. It is, moreover, not different concerning Egypt, that constant vexation to the city:

I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,
 the great dragon sprawling in the midst of its channels,
 saying, “My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.”
 I will put hooks in your jaws,
 and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales.
 I will draw you up from your channels,
 with all the fish of your channels
 sticking to your scales.
 I will fling you into the wilderness,
 you and all the fish of your channels;
 you shall fall in the open field,
 and not be gathered and buried.
 To the animals of the earth and to the birds of the air
 I have given you as food.
 Then all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know
 that I am the LORD
 because you were a staff of reed to the house of Israel;
 when they grasped you with the hand, you broke,
 and tore all their shoulders;
 and when they leaned on you, you broke,
 and made all their legs unsteady. (Ezekiel 29:3-7)

These poems of Ezekiel vigorously assert YHWH’s sovereignty and intentionality:

Then they shall know that I am [YHWH]. (26:6)
 For I have spoken, says the Lord GOD. (28:10)

Then all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am
the LORD. (29:6)

The intent and effect of the poetry is to wrest sovereignty from the powers that had intimidated and abused Israel.

Scholars have regularly noticed that Ezekiel, unlike Isaiah and Jeremiah, offers no oracle directly against Babylon.⁶ That fact is perhaps an indication that even poets must pay some attention to political reality.⁷ These oracles, moreover, do not say anything about the future of displaced Israel. But much is implied. Any listener could readily infer that the elimination of adversaries creates breathing space for the community gathered around the poet.

Some passages in Ezekiel, however, do articulate an anticipated well-being for the displaced community. In 34:11-16, for example, Ezekiel presents YHWH as the protective God of Israel who willingly and directly accepts governance of the community that had suffered because of bad shepherds (king). Now the poor leadership that caused displacement is displaced by YHWH's direct rule:

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.
... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make
them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I
will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and
I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will
destroy. I will feed them with justice. (34:11, 15-16)

The new shepherd will create a milieu of shalom that will be a sharp alternative to present circumstance. That act will cause a renovation of creation as well as a historical restoration:

I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild
animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and
sleep in the woods securely. I will make them and the region
around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers
in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of
the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its
increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall

know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke,
and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them.
(34:25-27)

So speaks a poet who does not need to explain or comment on "secondary causes," the means YHWH will employ to accomplish this restoration. It is enough to imagine, for such imagining authorizes and empowers and invites initiative-taking.⁸

The rhetoric of restoration abounds in this poetry. In 36:24-29, the poet can tersely embrace motifs of homecoming (v. 24), cultic cleansing to qualify to be in YHWH's presence (v. 25), a new will for obedience (v. 26), and a revivification of the fruitfulness of creation (v. 29). The poetry is clearly designed to shake the displaced out of lethargy, despair, and excessive accommodation to the force of empire.

The imagery of homecoming is even more direct in 37:1-14, wherein homecoming is likened to the resurrection of the dead: "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel" (v. 12).⁹

This imagery fully acknowledges the depth of death to which the displaced have sunk. But that depth is powerfully countered by the soaring possibility whereby, " 'You shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,' says the LORD" (v. 14).

The divine resolve renews the covenant that Israel's disobedience had placed in such jeopardy: "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore" (37:26).

Two terms for covenant, *peace* and *everlasting*, are used, and the verse ends in renewal creation and assurance of divine presence. The poet counters the dismal status of exiles by an eloquent scenario of new beginning.

The motif of divine presence sounded in 37:26 is fleshed out in

the final vision of temple presence (chaps. 40–48). The glory of YHWH that had departed the city in chapter 10 now returns in power and splendor:

The glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters, and the earth shone with his glory. The vision I saw was like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and like the vision that I had seen by the river Chebar; and I fell upon my face. As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple (43:2-5).

The glory that had seemed tentative and provisional is now “forever” (vv. 7, 9). It is no wonder that finally the new name of the city, imagined by the poet, is “The LORD is There” (48:35).

The prophet speaks these words in direct contradiction to the facts on the ground. It is the work of poets to contradict the facts on the ground and to invite the listeners to embrace an alternative future. The poetry is grounded in a deep theological memory. But finally it depends on (inspired?) imagination to summon the community to an alternative reality. In all of these texts, poetic, imaginative discourse is required to circumvent the hopelessness of Babylonian reality. No one could see how to get from here to there. But the poet is into vision, not explanation. Those visions, moreover, are heard among the displaced as God’s own committed utterance that alters the templates of historical circumstance.

2. *Jeremiah*

Jeremiah, like Ezekiel, had offered his share of “unwelcome poetry,” utilizing various images of infidelity, terminal illness, and war in order to show YHWH’s attitude toward Jerusalem. Like Ezekiel, the Jeremiah tradition eventually turns from unwelcome to “welcome poetry,” the latter an invitation to trust and imagine and act beyond the devastation and displacement. While Jeremiah is a

contemporary of Ezekiel, his poetic imagery moves in a quite different direction concerning covenant and land. Whereas Ezekiel is preoccupied with the uncompromising holiness of YHWH, Jeremiah focuses on the wounded, betrayed fidelity of YHWH. Jeremiah’s more lyrical poetry penetrates down to the very bottom of faith issues. Jeremiah’s poetry of new possibility occurs largely in chapters 29–33, and seeks to function, as does the promissory material of Ezekiel, to shake the displaced out of their deep despair and capitulation to imperial definitions of reality.¹⁰ Out of this rich poetry, I will mention only four texts.

In 30:12-17 the poet takes up the imagery of terminal illness from 8:22.¹¹ Verses 12-15 accent the deep and hopeless situation of failed Israel, now without allies or agents of healing. But then, in a stunning rhetorical maneuver, the poem has YHWH reverse field. The same voice that declared, “Your hurt is incurable” (v. 12), now asserts:

I will restore health to you,
and your wounds I will heal, says the LORD,
because they have called you an outcast:
“It is Zion; no one cares for her!” (v. 17)

The about-face of the poem reflects the remarkable about-face of YHWH, who utters the poem that eventuates in an about-face for Israel’s historical destiny. The incurable will be healed!

A second image concerns the “scattered” (displaced) who will be “gathered” (brought home). Jeremiah imagines a great procession of “scattered” Israelites being brought home by YHWH:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,