

By The Waters of Babylon: Ingathering Sunday

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In the years around 600 B.C.E., the leaders and teachers of the people of Judea were captured and taken to Babylonia, far over the hills and across the desert, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in the land known today as Iraq. While the poor farmers were left behind, major cities and towns were left in ruin, and the nation was paralyzed and split among several ruling powers.

While the exile of Jewish leaders in Babylonia was not a harsh enslavement, they were kept in a land some 800 miles from their homes, unable to build their nation, living constantly in danger of losing their culture and their religion, afraid of forgetting the things that made them who they were.

In Babylonia, Jews were also kept from worshipping in the Temple in Jerusalem, until then the central place where their faith was practiced. Psalm 137, which later rails against the Babylonian captives in not-so-nice language, begins with an expression of this sadness—the inability of the people to sing their sacred songs so very far from home. The Psalm, written during the seventy years of exile, sings:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion, our home. On the willow trees, we hung up our harps. There, our captors asked us to sing. "Sing one of the songs of Zion," they teased us. But how could we sing the songs of our God in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

Far from the Temple, a new form of Judaism had to emerge in order for the people to retain their culture and their religion. A new understanding of the relationship between the people and their God needed to be formed—one that was not based specifically on the Temple in Jerusalem.

It was there, in Babylonia, that the Jewish people developed the notion that would later be called the "synagogue," a place to worship, a place to call home, a place to practice their religion even when far from the land of Israel.

Biblical scholar Bernhard Anderson writes, "In the Exile, then, the people realized that they could worship anywhere with the confidence that God would hear their prayers and be their sanctuary in a foreign land." (Anderson, 402)

In 537 B.C.E., the Babylonian empire fell to Persia, and the Persian Emperor gave the Jewish people permission to return home. Some 40,000 people made the long journey across the hills and desert back to their homeland.

The exile had bound them together as a people. It had forced them to understand their teachings in new ways, to create rituals that could be performed by small communities gathered across the countryside. It inspired them to found schools, to develop a standard written alphabet, and to begin the ongoing dialogue about how their Scriptures should best be interpreted and lived.

In response to the Babylonian exile, a new set of religious leaders and writers emerged, leaders who were concerned with gathering together the most important things in the Jewish religious practice. These teachers would write some of the most important Hebrew Scriptures.

The Jewish people arrived back in Judea with a re-dedication to their religious and cultural tradition. They were given a new perspective on other cultures as well—no longer were other cultures viewed solely as a threat to theirs.

When they got home, their faith was “enlarged by the vision of new horizons that had never been seen so clearly before.... The people realized that they must look beyond their own... community to the whole civilized world....” in order to make real the promise of their God. It was, in fact, their experiences of and interactions with the different cultures of the Ancient Near East while in Babylonia that convinced the Jewish people that they were called by their God to bring blessings and justice to “all the families of the Earth,” and not just their own people. (Anderson, 418)

It was in exile that the people of Israel understood their interdependent connection to others outside of their nation.

But seventy years spent living in a land far, far away also made them grateful to be home. Though they learned to worship together in new ways, they still felt a deep connection to their homeland. The return home was a cause to celebrate.

They celebrated especially in the Fall, at their New Year, when they sang songs to God and proclaimed thanks for being together for another year. These songs of praise and thanks are echoed in the middle section of the book we now call Isaiah, a section written at about the time of this joyous homecoming. It is written there:

Go up to the highest mountain, people of Zion, and shout the good news. Lift up your voice with strength, people of Jerusalem, proclaim without fear to all the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” He is here, he his mighty, and he is just. Your God will feed his flock like a shepherd, and protect the lambs with his arms. (Isaiah 40:9-11)

Like those ancient people of Israel, we, too, celebrate being home in the fall. Though our modern calendar puts the new year months away, and though many of us were here all summer, and though none of us, certainly, were in exile(vacation, maybe—exile, no) in the months since we’ve seen you last, it is in September when we celebrate the fact that we can return together to worship. It is this time that we set aside to celebrate our community’s gathering.

And though we don’t, generally, take this time to shout praise to God (since not all of us agree on whether or not that would even be appropriate), or to assure ourselves of the protection and love of a supernatural being, we are glad to be home, and need to take this time to shout our own good news from the mountaintops and the valleys.

Our own good news that a place exists where people can bring their own minds and hearts and experiences to bear on what they claim as religious truth, where the interpretation of one or a few is never taken as dogma.

Our own good news that we, as humans, have an incredible power to create—to create community, to create beauty, to create justice and peace.

Our own good news that with that creative power comes great responsibilities—a responsibility to act in ways that honor our Earth instead of destroying it, a responsibility to act with compassion and empathy to our fellow beings, a responsibility to avoid falling into the hypocrisy of our own fundamentalisms (no matter how much we might individually believe them).

We can and should take this joyous occasion of gathering as a worshipping community to proclaim our good news that the power of relationship and love can overcome even the most profound theological differences—that here, we come together as theists, atheists, and agnostics, mystics and rationalists, Christians, Jews, Humanists, Buddhists, Pagans and more, as people with theological labels combined only in our own imaginations. Here, we come together knowing that it's more important to be with one another than to agree.

We, this gathered community, should be sharing the good news that we have found something greater than we are as individuals, and though we each give it different names (God, relationship, intellect, spirit, goodness and more), it is worthy of our praise and admiration—it is worthy of our worship together.

Two thousand, six hundred years ago, a people far away from their home learned to sing a new song. While they wept with sorrow for their old ways, they created new music, new ways of being with one another, new appreciation for what they had together.

Those people came home and shouted their praise from the mountains and hills, thankful to be back, and grateful for the lessons learned while away.

Today, we are home. Whether we were here every Sunday all summer, taking a little break, traveling the world or occupied with other things in our lives, we are back here now. Together. We undoubtedly have stories to tell, things to catch up on, things we'd like to do and suggest. We might be planning to shout good news from the nearest hill.

That can all wait until tomorrow. For now, let us all be glad to be together. Blessed be.

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