



River Were Benefice

Grappling with the Old Testament

A Lent Study Programme for 2023

being challenged today
by the voices from
our shared history

Lent 2023

Resource and aid to reflection

Part 4



Session 4

Adapt or die; Exile and Transformation

If I forget you, Jerusalem ...

Psalm 137

The shock of the fall of Jerusalem

'If I forget you, Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!'

Psalm 137:5 (Revised New Jerusalem Bible)

It is pivotal to any understanding of the Old Testament to recognise the radical, transformative experience of the Exile and its impact on the faith of the Hebrews. From the Exile we now talk of 'The Jews' and of the evolving Jewish religion. Through the Exile the people had to 'give up' or re-shape their theology and their practice

'By the rivers of Babylon
there we sat and wept,
remembering Zion;
on the poplars that grew there
we hung up our harps....

Psalm 137:1 & 2 Revised New Jerusalem Bible translation

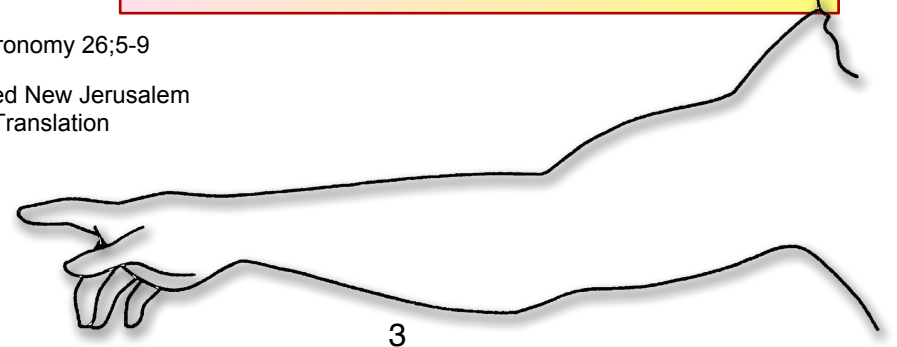
The Hebrew Kingdom of Judah – a tiny 'buffer' state between the empires of Egypt and Babylon sought to maintain its independence (or some semblance of it) by trying to play one empire off against the other. The Kingdom of Judah had maintained the succession of the line of the family of David. It had maintained a sacred sacrificial cult at the one, centralised temple in Jerusalem. The covenant belief of being a specially chosen people was further strengthened by the belief that this covenant was further cemented by the line of David.

One of the oldest passages of the Old Testament is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. It is an early credal statement and reveals the self-understanding of the peoples who were then to see the destruction of their capital and the laying waste of their land;

"My father was a wandering Aramaean; he went down to Egypt, few in number, and stayed there; there he became a great, powerful and numerous nation. The Egyptians ill-treated us, they oppressed us and inflicted harsh slavery on us. But we called on the LORD, God of our ancestors. The LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought us here and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

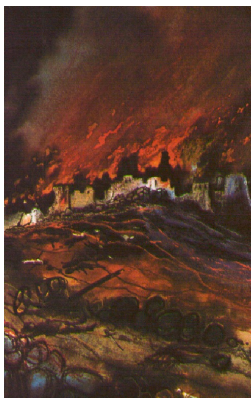
Deuteronomy 26:5-9

Revised New Jerusalem
Bible Translation



The politics of Judah leading up to the first siege of Jerusalem by Babylon and then the final destruction was unwise and unrealistic. The Babylonians no longer tolerated this troublesome little state which had been seeking Egyptian support.

The city was reduced to rubble. Perhaps 20,000 people – leaders and influential citizens and their families and dependants – were taken to the city of Babylon as exiles. This included the royal family. Others fled to safety in such places as Egypt and elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean area. In this way began the ‘diaspora’ – the dispersal of Jewish communities far beyond the traditional lands of Judah and Israel.



‘Judah has gone into exile after much pain and toil. Living among the nations she finds no rest; her persecutors have all overtaken her; there is no way out.’

Lamentations 1;3
Revised New Jerusalem Bible Translation

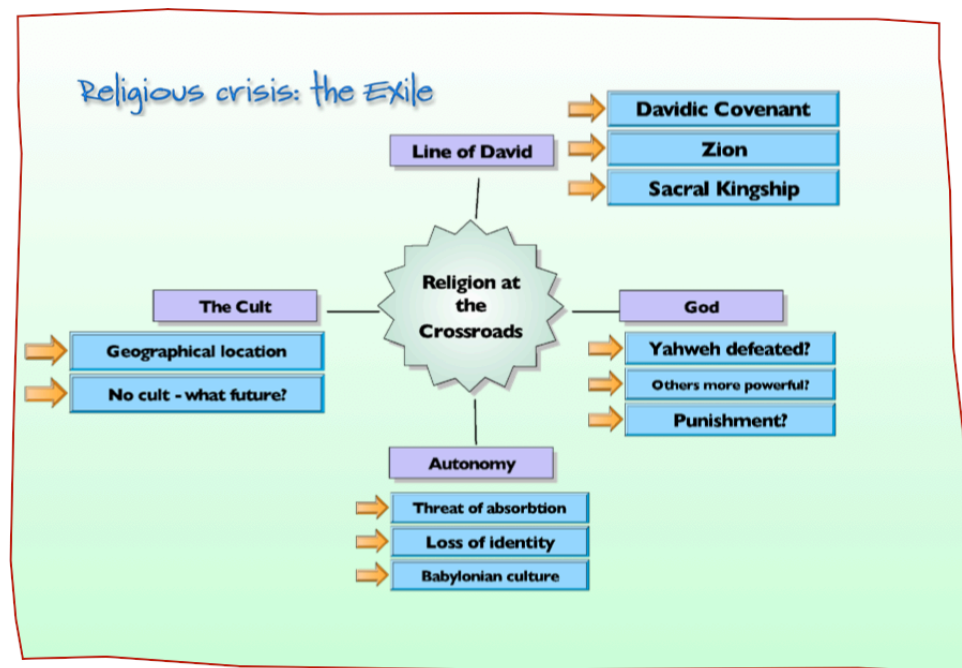
Behind was left a nation, leaderless and in ruins. The population was largely reduced, it would seem, to a subsistence economy.

Those taken to Babylon did not face an ancient version of internment or concentration camps. With certain limitations on travelling, the Jewish exiles could meet, work, worship and pray. They lived in a city which was cosmopolitan and tolerant of religious diversity. Far beyond the time of Jesus, Babylon remained a large, prosperous and influential centre of Judaism. It was to be one of two centres where the Talmud was agreed and produced. (see below for more on the **Talmud**)

The threat to the religion of Yahweh and the identity of the Jewish People

If the religion of the Hebrews was to survive it would have to discover and understand meaning in this new situation. It would need to have faith and hope for the future in the face of a completely new reality.

The threats to the religion were numerous and of differing types. This diagram summarises these challenges to the religion of the Hebrews.;



The group session will explore this further.

The Great Prophets of the Exilic Period

The Old Testament presents three major prophets addressing this period. Two come from the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The other comes from the time immediately before the end of the enforced exile, as Babylon is about to fall to Cyrus the Great in 539 BC.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah

..... was active for several decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem. He seems to have fled to Egypt, avoiding exile in Babylon. He had been highly critical of the ill-judged politics of Judah in his time. He warned of coming disaster which would be wrought by Yahweh in punishment for their unfaithfulness.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel

..... was active at the start of the Exile and did enter exile in Babylon. He tackles the fundamental questions outline above. He has harsh words to say. His spiritual insights, however, helped to start a transformation in Jewish thought. At the heart of his teaching was the promise of transformation at the hand of Yahweh, for the faithful. Chapter 36, for example, talks of 'hearts of stone' being changed into 'hearts of flesh'. The famous image of the valley of the dry bones being regenerated as God's spirit breathes life into them, is found in Ezekiel 37;

'I shall take you from among the nations and gather you back from all the lands and bring you home to your own land. I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your filth and of all your foul idols. I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit in you and make you keep my laws and respect and practise my judgements.'

Ezekiel 36;24-27

Revised New Jerusalem Bible Translation

Isaiah 40-55

The Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40 – 55)

.... Was active at the end of Exile in Babylon. Some of the finest Hebrew poetry is found in this part of the Book of Isaiah. The Isaiah of the Exile clearly saw the hand of the Lord in the rise and conquests of Cyrus. Here was the real promise of the end of compulsory captivity. He proclaimed that Yahweh is not merely the strongest God over all other gods. He is unequivocal that there is only one God; Yahweh. All others are false, to be mocked and derided. Cyrus is an instrument of the Lord and a glorious return to Zion (i.e., Jerusalem) will come soon.

Exile and Beyond

New patterns in Jewish religious practice.

Given hope and an ability to begin to make some sort of sense of the disaster of exile, this large, elite group spent two generations in exile under the conditions described above. They did not remain inactive. They did not give up.

Evidence shows that this was the start of a creative period of spiritual growth, development and strengthening for the Hebrews in Babylon. One writer said

"Israel went into exile a nation and returned as a 'theocratic community'".

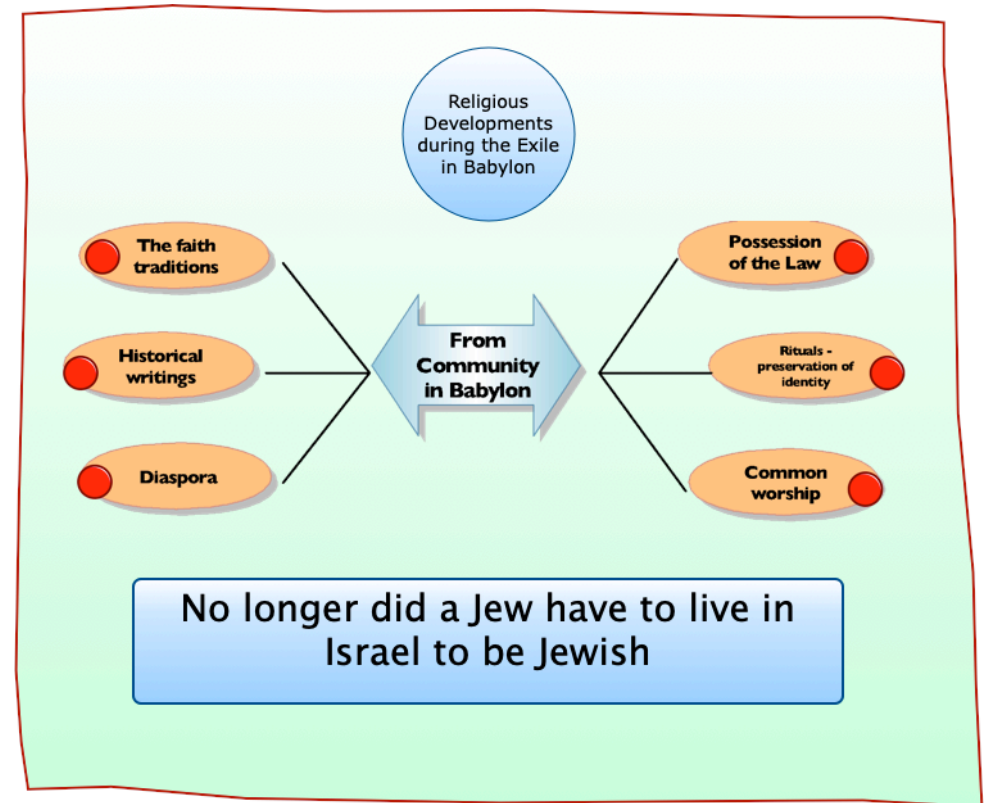
There was no Temple and no sacrificial cult. Exile brought the end of the line of David and removal from a sacred land. The Hebrews, we can see, had to understand themselves in a different way. They had to re-imagine what it meant to be the people of God. They needed to understand in new ways what covenant and faithfulness involved. They were forced to realise new ways to preserve their history, their traditions and their identity.

*I will be your God
you will be my people*

Through this period important aspects of what developed into the Judaism were strengthened or reimagined. A Judaism familiar to our present world was starting to take shape.

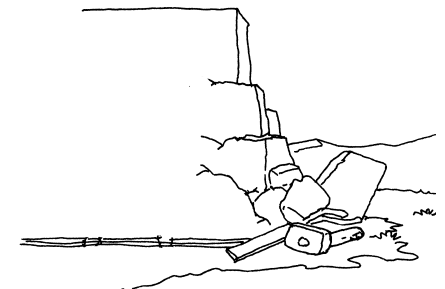


This diagram summarises what scholarship has identified as six notable religious products of the enforced exile.



These six aspects will be explored in the group session

There was no great return from the Exile – the irony is that after 538 BC, more chose to stay in Babylon than to return to a broken and desolate Jerusalem and Judaea.



For discussion and reflection

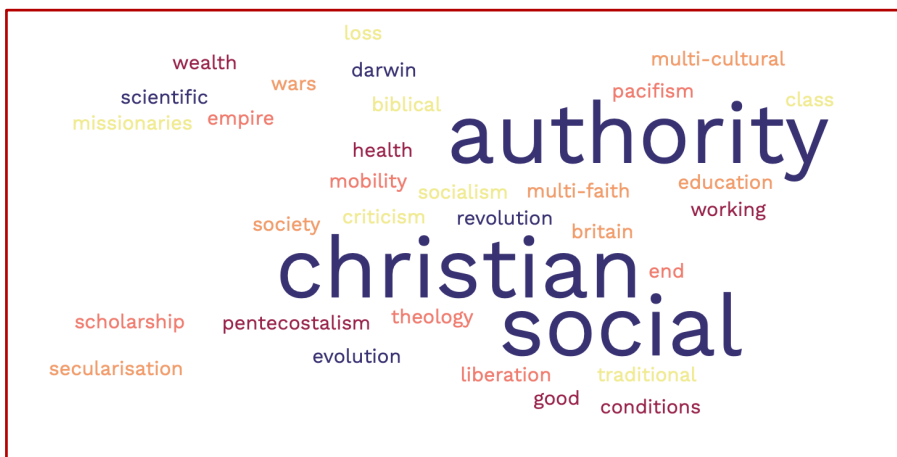
Consider the Church in the past two centuries in western European society: Two centuries of challenge to religious world-views and dogmas, challenges to social order, the rise of multi-faith and multi-cultural Britain, challenges to the position of the Church in wider society... there have been many others.

'The Hebrews went into Exile a people and came out a faith'.

Have we done the same?

1. If so, in what ways have we been in 'exile'?
2. Which challenges have been the greatest for the Church in this country since the start of the nineteenth century? How have we responded to them?

Exile and restoration in our age?



Further reading

The following is not an exhaustive or comprehensive list. It may help the reader to begin to find more to read and discover.

SCM Study Guide to the Old Testament by John Holdsworth. © John Holdsworth 2005. Published by SCM - Canterbury Press. ISBN 978 0 334 02985 4

A History of the Bible (The Book and its Faiths) by Prof. John Barton (Especially Part One). © John Barton 2019. Published by Penguin Books. ISBN 978 0 141 97850 5.

Reading the Old Testament, An Introduction by Lawrence Boadt © 1984 Paulist Press. ISBN 0 8091 2631 1

How to Read the Old Testament by Etienne Charpentier. Translation © 1981 John Bowden. Published in English by SCM Press 1982. ISBN 0 334 02057 3.

Acknowledgements

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