

Exile Part 4

Exile & the Wisdom Warrior

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Man

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Jon: Hi, this is Jon at The Bible Project. Today we continue our conversation on the theme of exile in the Bible. An exile is someone who lives away from their home. They long for home but they're unable to get there. We're in our fourth hour of conversation on this topic, and you can go back and listen to previous conversations to get up to speed. But here's a quick recap.

In 586 BC, the Jewish people were invaded by the Babylonian Empire. The city of Jerusalem was ransacked, and many of the Jewish people were forced to leave their home and find a new existence in a foreign land - the land of Babylon. Exile is a traumatic experience for anyone or any culture. It was so significant for the Jewish people that when their prophets and scribes began stitching together the stories of the people, they did so while considering what it means to be an exile and if there's any hope of going back home.

Tim: As the authors of the Bible go back to talk about the history of humanity that Israel fits into of Genesis 1 through 11, now the history of humanity is told as a story from promise land to exile. From Eden, Genesis 1 and 2 to exile in Babylon, Genesis 11.

Jon: They found that it wasn't just their people who were an exile, rather, all of humanity was in a type of exile, cast out from the world as it ought to be. In the book of Genesis, God called a family out of Babylon, family of Abraham, to be a representative family that comes back from exile and renews their relationship with God.

In the same way, Israel living in Babylon looked at the stories of Abraham as hope and inspiration that they too could one day go home. And they did. But when they did, they found their homeland was not what they remembered. It was now a ghost town compared to what it had been in the days of David and Solomon.

Tim: The story of exile in the Bible is of God's people coming back to the land promised to them. But the way that it's ruled and the way that they live on it is now this existential anxiety, where this is our home, but it's not being run like our home, it's not being run by the values of God's kingdom, and we can't even still get our act together here.

Jon: Their homeland, a shadow of what it used to be, friends and family scattered all over the world, military overlords still in control over them, but—

Tim: All of a sudden, what you think was the death of God's covenant mission through Israel, it takes a surprise turn in that Israel dispersed among the nations becomes the surprising way that God continues His work among the nations.

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Jon: A plot twist in the exile story. That's coming up today in our episode. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[00:03:14]

Jon: All right. We're continuing our conversation on the biblical theme of exile. Why don't you do a little summary as to where we've been so far?

Tim: Again, to go back to the very first thing, I think, if I remember correctly, what we had from our first conversation was that this is not a biblical idea that anyone wakes up thinking, "You know what's really one of the most important ideas in the whole Bible? It's the exile of the Israelites to Babylon in 586 BC."

But actually, it's one of these events that once you know about it, you can see that it's permeated and left its stamp on every part of the Bible. And it's actually a really important unifying thread from the earliest pages of the Bible on to the last pages of the Bible. Exile to Babylon.

Jon: It's been a week since we talked about this last. I have been trying to live in the skin of the identity of exile - which in the way we talked about it, which I've never done before - in the sense of this is home, but it's not complete. Or this is where I live, but there's something missing. This is my body, but I still feel like a foreigner somehow inside my own body. I still feel like a foreigner inside my own home, in my own city, even though this is my city and this is my home.

That really helped. It left a mark on me thinking that way. I think I said before, it was like that existential angst. That sense of like, this isn't completely right. Why am I not happy? Why am I not content? Why are relationships so hard? Why do things break down so easily? And why do I desire something more? That all fits into this theme of being an exile?

Tim: That's right. It doesn't seem like it would at first because the idea of an exile is somebody who's, "I'm not in the place where I belong, and so what I'm looking for is to get away from this place and circumstance and get to that other place."

Jon: The place I'm really from.

Tim: And that is—

Jon: Heaven is my home.

Tim: Yeah, that kind of thing.

Jon: One day I'll...tons of hymns about one leaving this place and going to heaven.

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Tim: Another example of a half-truth that has become the whole truth and therefore distorted, I think, how we see the story of the Bible. Because big picture, the story is, humanity belongs in this overlap of heaven on earth, in the sacred Mountain Garden, and that humanity's home is a world that is permeated with Divine love and divine presence.

That's the image on pages 1 and 2 of the Bible, and that's the reality and the experience of the world from which humans are banished because humans want to set up a world by their own knowledge of good and evil. That world leads to Babylon. Genesis 3 through 11.

What's fascinating about the design of the biblical story is, that's where all humanity is now. Then out of Babylon, God chooses one family to turn into the counter Babylon, and then they end up failing the job miserably and they end up, that family ends up, exiled back into Babylon. So you get that overlay of the human story that ended in Babylon, exile in Babylon and then Israel story that end in exile.

Jon: It's an inversion.

Tim: Yes, that's right. But here's where it's crucially important is that the Israelites within the biblical story they do return. Many do return to Jerusalem but the Jerusalem and the promised land that they return to it wasn't life as it was supposed to be. When they reached for language to talk about what it should be like, they reached back to their golden era which was the reigns of David and Solomon.

And so those ancient stories about David and Solomon in the promised land became these images of the future—

Jon: Even though those times were pretty screwed up too?

Tim: Even though those times were themselves compromised by great evil and rebellion —

Jon: That still was the way that they could understand this desire that they had. The sense of completion that they wanted.

Tim: Whatever the restoration of this story is going to look like, it's at least going to look like in the days of Solomon when gold was as common as dust and everyone had their own fig tree and vine to cultivate.

Jon: The good old days.

Tim: Yeah, like that. Again, this is why being an exile doesn't mean I don't belong here on earth. The story of exile in the Bible is of God's people coming back to the land

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that's promised to them, but the way that it's ruled and the way that they live on it is now this existential anxiety. Where this is our home, but it's not being run like our home, it's not being run by the values of God's kingdom and we can't even still get our act together here.

Jon: It would be kind of if Adam and Eve somehow got past the cherubim with the flaming sword. They got back in the garden and they're there and they're like, "We're back in back in." But they still feel ashamed. They still don't trust God. God's not there. You'd be like, "Oh, we're back in the garden, but this is not right. It feels empty. It feels incomplete."

Tim: The theme of exile, that point becomes no longer about just geography. It gets wrapped up into the Bible's language about time of the current age and the age to come. The state of exile is this world as we know it, which is our home but it's an estate that isn't complete and isn't finished. So we are looking for some other time in this place when this place gets redeemed to be what it's fully supposed to be. And until that time, we can use this language from the story that we are exiles.

Jon: We're exiles of time not of location.

Tim: Actually, this is now just occurring to me, but that's right. The spatial language of exile, I'm in one place rather than another place, gets totally merged with the Bible's view of time. That we're in a time—

Jon: We're exile to an age.

Tim: Yeah, to an age. To heaven on earth that is good, but isn't yet completed, and that will be fully redeemed. And when this place is fully redeemed, will be in it and call it home. I think that's the vision here.

Anyway, that's the summary that we went through in the biblical story and then what that's trying to get at. We know that's true because, in the later books of the Old Testament, you get language. Like Ezra or Nehemiah can speak of, "We're back in the land, but we're slaves on our own land." Or you get language...I just got done with a week teaching a graduate level course through the book of Isaiah. Oh, my gosh, so amazing.

But in the latter chapters of Isaiah, you get language about going back to the land within poems that assume we're already in the land.

Jon: So it's a metaphor?

Tim: Yeah. Exile and returning back to Jerusalem becomes a metaphor for—

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Jon: Like a state of completion.

Tim: Correct. Exile ceases to be about a place and it becomes a mode of existence in a broken world - the side of the new creation.

Jon: That's interesting.

Tim: That's exactly when we start turning into the New Testament and we see John the Baptist, for example, he's out in the wilderness, and he goes down to a place in the desert by the Jordan River that was symbolically the place where all Israel crossed over into the land. He makes a symbolic passing through the waters. Getting dunked through waters. It's symbolically going through the waters again.

Jon: Coming back into the promised land.

Tim: And coming back into the land. But the whole point of it is about repentance and forgiveness.

Jon: So he's baptizing you not back into the land because you're in the land. He's baptizing you into a new way of being.

Tim: The kingdom of God way of living in this land.

Jon: Which is entering the promised land in a poetic sense.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Which you said Isaiah does?

Tim: He quotes from Isaiah Chapter 40, which on one level is announcing, "hey, we can come back from Babylon." It's referring to that point in Israel story where they could come back from exile in Babylon. But by the time you get to the end of the book of Isaiah, you're already back in the land.

What we need is not just to physically come back into this land. We need for Israel and the whole world to come out of the real exile to the real Babylon, which is much bigger than just what happened in those few centuries. And you can see John the Baptist doing that because he lives in the land.

Jon: "Hey, guys. Let's take a backpack trip outside the land so we could re-enter the land." And it's like, "We're already in the land."

Tim: The whole point is now reentry into the promised land becomes an image of returning from the real exile. The Babylonian Empire from John the Baptist point of

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view cease to exist half millennia ago, but he's still out there quoting poetry from his Bible about returning from exile in Babylon.

Jon: So funny.

Tim: It is. We could probably think of some good analogies.

Jon: I was just thinking one that's really absurd actually. If I was coming back to Portland, I'm usually going through the airport. And so going through would be coming through the...I became baptized through the airport.

Tim: Yeah, sure. You're immersed.

[crosstalk 00:13:56]

Jon: I was going to say having to go through TSA, but that's actually going actually back. I was going to say going through security was like my baptism, but that doesn't work. But it is baptism off topic, but baptism became a Christian sacrament, which must be connected to what John was doing, but it wasn't exactly what John was doing.

Tim: Actually, the way that John's baptism morphed into Jesus movement, baptism is connected. For John, this was the symbolic rebooting of the story. And the New Covenant Israel coming into the new land, again, has to go through the symbolic passing through the river. It's a way of beginning a part of the new covenant people.

Then once you get the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection all condensed as laid on top of that, then what I'm going through in the waters is I'm doing the same thing. I'm dying as a human. I'm going under the waters mean my old humanity that's an exile to Babylon dies. And I come out of the waters as a new Jesus style human. It's very similar imagery where I'm still leaving the old behind and going into the new thing.

Then you live from that day forward with your identity as "I'm a part of the new Jesus creation even though I'm still living here in the land of Babylon." It's very similar. It just becomes new creation, old creation when you put resurrection as the metaphor.

Jon: That airport thing would work is if you're flying international, then you have to get through customs.

Tim: Oh, there you go.

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Jon: It's like if I was an expert and I was like, "I'm not going to be an American anymore," and then I come back and I'm living in America but I'm like, "Eh, I still don't really care about America." Then someone's like, "You need to really care." So we go, we leave the country and we come back on a flight and I go through customs but not till I come back to America would signify that this time I'm truly emotionally, psychologically going to be an American, then I'm doing what John was doing.

Tim: Something like that.

Jon: That is really dumb and very American-centric, so forget it. Cut that out.

Tim: Not every analogy is perfect. Where that all comes together we identified is in the letter 1 Peter, where Peter a leader of a Jewish messianic movement is writing to Jesus communities all around Asia Minor, majority of whom are not Jewish, but yet he's using this language of Jewish identity and heritage calling them exiles and sojourners in towns that are their home. What sense does that even make, except that he has a story in his mind?

Then at the end of that letter, he says, "Hey, the church community in Babylon says, Hi." There, Babylon become an image for the current world order, and exile becomes the way followers of Jesus are to live in this world order, which doesn't mean this isn't my home.

Jon: These biblical authors are becoming really fast and loose with language, right?

Tim: No.

Jon: Yeah. They're calling Rome Babylon. They're calling people exiles.

Tim: Oh, got it. It's code language. Inner Jesus community code language. Every subculture does this - develops its own.

Jon: It's just tough on you want to say like, "What does the Bible say plainly that story means?"

Tim: But that is its plain meaning. Just it's plain meaning for this persecuted religious minority—

Jon: It's not plain to me.

Tim: It's not often. But isn't that a great thing about the Bible? It forces you to keep learning and thinking.

Jon: To keep spelunking.

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Tim: Yeah.

[00:18:40]

Tim: Here's the next step I want to take and it's kind of into the next half of this idea. I think the video will just need to somehow do that thing - what we just summarized.

Jon: Sure.

Tim: Find a way to do that. Tell the story and show how Babylon leaving and coming back home and it's my home but complete. We're going to have to do all of that. I think probably that's the first half maybe in two-thirds of the video. The last set of movements has to do with the surprise.

When you go back to the Old Testament stories, were jumping back into the history. So 586 was when the Babylonian armies destroy Jerusalem, burn the temple, took the third wave of Israelites and the biggest wave of into captive exile. So they take them, they relocate them all over ancient Babylon.

As a reader, in one sense, you think, "Oh, yeah, this is the end of the road for Israel." Hope it's there. The point was, the Israel be different than all the nations. They weren't and so they end up exiled to Babylon. But all of a sudden, what you think was the death of this God's covenant mission through Israel, it takes a surprise turn in that Israel dispersed among the nations becomes the surprising way that God continues His work among the nations.

In other words, the exile and the scattering of Israel actually becomes the way that Israel...or some Israelites become priests to the nations in ways that would have never happened if they would have stayed centralized Kingdom in the land.

There are three places this comes together. One is in the latter half of the book of Isaiah. Another is in the book of Jeremiah, where he writes a letter to the exiles. Then another one is the book of Daniel.

First of all, here's something awesome. If you say the book of Ezekiel and somebody has a rough Bible knowledge, and you say, Ezekiel, they're likely to think of maybe just one or two things.

Jon: The weird contraption that flies in the air?

Tim: Yeah, the weird flying Godmobile on page 1 of Ezekiel.

Jon: And eating poop.

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- Tim: Oh, yes, the Ezekiel bread thing. Do you know about this? The Ezekiel bread?
- Jon: Yeah. The bread that they sell in the market?
- Tim: Yeah.
- Jon: I've heard you complain about it.
- Tim: They just copied one verse. Like ripped bleeding. Its heart bleeding, ripping it out of context like a recipe for Biblical bread.
- Jon: And it doesn't taste very good.
- Tim: But if you read in context, Ezekiel 4, it's bread that symbolizes the meager poor material or resources they'll have to make bread while the city is under siege. Then, to top it, they bake it over human poop. Then he complained to God. He's like, "No, I don't want to do that." And God says, "Okay. Yeah, that's kind of gross." So he uses cow poop instead to cook it over. Which I think is actually normal.
- Jon: A lot of people do that?
- Tim: Yeah. Cultures around the world, people use...what do they call it? Those hard—
- Jon: Oh, yeah. What do they call that? I don't know.
- Tim: I think it's very common fuel. But human poops, that's gross.
- Jon: Personally, both sound gross to me, but I'm not going to hate. What I will hate is Ezekiel bread doesn't taste very good.
- Tim: It's just like dry cardboard.
- Jon: I think what it came from is...There's this food movement of like, you know, how there's health fads? You can make a lot of money on a health fad. Like you start a new health fad, a new diet craze, you're getting rich. So think about it. What would be a really easy health craze to manufacturer a religious one? Like, "Eat like they say you should eat in the Bible." I think that's a stab at it.
- Tim: Yeah. So there are two things that come to your mind when you think of Ezekiel. The flying Godmobile and the bread.
- Jon: Eating the bread over human feces.
- Tim: Number three I guess. The third thing.

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- Jon: Third thing comes to mind is...what should I be thinking about here?
- Tim: I don't know. I was going to say the valley of dry bones, but maybe it's not iconic me.
- Jon: It should be but it's not.
- Tim: You already have to know the Bible to—
- Jon: Well, I never really learned about that until Bible school. It's not something we talked about in church, ever.
- Tim: Even growing up in church, you didn't ever?
- Jon: Not in my church.
- Tim: Painting stories, sermons?
- Jon: No. It's a weird passage.
- Tim: Here's why this is important. Ezekiel training to be a priest in Jerusalem til he got exiled in his late 20s. Imagine this. Ezekiel starts in what's called the 30th year, which almost certainly is referring to his birthday. And 30 is how old he would be to enter this career as a priest in Jerusalem.
- Jon: You have to be 30?
- Tim: Yeah. So just imagine you've trained your whole life in a family business, so to speak. I mean, it's like based on lineage. In his late 20s is when Babylon comes to term. The book of Ezekiel begins marking his 30th year. And what's he doing? He's not offering sacrifice.
- Jon: He's not presenting.
- Tim: He's sitting miserably by irrigation canal in a refugee camp in Babylon. That's how the book of Ezekiel starts. It's very dismal just from the first...You can imagine the headspace—
- Jon: You're about to graduate Harvard and then the economy collapses.
- Tim: That's it. I mean, he was set up for a life of a great job, and a very meaningful role in Israelites society and all came crashing down. All that to say is, he grew up in and around the place where many of the biblical texts would have been kept and studied in priestly families, and all this.

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The point is he knows his Bible, and the book of Ezekiel shows a keen awareness of the traditions and stories that we also have in the early chapters of the book of Genesis. The stories of humanity in the garden, and the banishment and so on.

When he wants to interpret the meaning of Israel going into exile, he uses the language of death, which is very powerful. Being here in Babylon is a form of spiritual death. He uses lots of violent death imagery to talk about what happened when they were taken captive and hauled off to where he is now in Babylon. But then he has this hope that God's not going to give up on His promises and that He's going to return His people to the land.

You get this cool image and these twin chapters in Ezekiel 36 and 37 where he has this speech that's actually Divine God's speech in Ezekiel 36. God says, "I'm going to take you all from the nations, gather you from all the lands back into your own land and the desolate land - think Genesis 3 when they're banished, and the land is cursed with thorns and thistles and all this - that becomes also the paradigm for when Israel was banished from the land. So to be regathered into the land is like to reverse the banishment.

The desolate land will be cultivated instead of being a desolation and people will say, "Well, this desolate land has become like the Garden of Eden and the waste desolate lands are fortified and inhabited." So for him, the hope of return from exile, it becomes parallel to humanity getting back to the garden.

Then you read the next poem, Ezekiel 37. He's depicting the miserable exiles in Babylon as a Big Valley full of dry dead human bones. The hope of return to the promised land is the hope that God's Spirit comes and recreates. It's very powerful image. Like skin starts crawling up onto the bones and then muscles, and then, right?

Then they're sitting there, these human bodies in the valley. It's all in a dream. A dream that he has. Then God's Spirit comes and invigorates this and he sees a whole huge host of new humans. And that's his image for return from exile. So for Ezekiel banishment from the world as it ought to be, is a form of death - the living death. Therefore, return from exile is new garden of Eden and new humanity.

Jon: Not just death. It's like your dead and your bones are dry, and you're really dead.

Tim: It's very important. At this stage in the biblical story, he's using it as a metaphor to describe people who are alive, but they're alive in the place that isn't what God fully intended for them. That becomes an image for living in Babylon.

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Jon: And so much so the language he uses his of like a corpse that has so far gone that it's decayed to the point where now it's just dry bones.

Tim: Think of the theme of the desert movie where you're marooned in the desert and there's the dead camel skeleton with nothing on it. It's just been sitting there for decades withering and drying. That's the image. That's the image of Israel in exile, but he overlays it with the story of humanity exiled from Eden.

Jon: When you say overlays it, he's talking about the same time?

Tim: Well, think of the way that humanity banished to the ending up in Babylon. Exodus 3 to 11. He's overlaying the story of he and his people's experience with that story. Their having to leave the promised land is like all humanity banished from the garden.

Jon: Oh, I see. Just like Adam and Eve leaving the garden and their descendants ending in Babylon, so Israel had to leave the garden, the promised land and now they're rotting in Babylon?

Tim: Correct.

Jon: They're past rotting. They've rotted and they're dry bones.

Tim: The point is, I can already see within the Bible here's the biblical author using the story of Adam and Eve exiled and ultimately leading to Babylon. He's using it as the paradigm or a way to think about his own life story about exiled from the land Babylon.

Therefore, when God reverses all of this, when we get to go back to the land, it will be like a return to Eden and it'll be like a new God recreating humans to live in the world.

Jon: So that's Ezekiel while in banishment thinking that?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But then you get Isaiah who comes back to the land and he's like, "No, we're still exiles."

Tim: What you see in the book of Isaiah then is the next step the story.

Jon: And that's called the Bible contradiction. Is what that's called.

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Tim: It's interesting. The story is told in Ezra and Nehemiah. The people go back into the land, but the great promises don't materialize. And it's because Israel is just as morally compromised as it was when they were here before.

Therefore, you get this image, especially in the book of Isaiah that even though we've come back physically, humanity and Israel included is still exiled in Babylon. And exile then becomes a metaphor to describe this world as we know it before God's kingdom comes.

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Tim: What I want to focus on now is this moment where Israel is still stuck in Babylon. Ezekiel repainted the return in Garden of Eden the language and so on, but there was still a historical moment that lasted many generations of Israel sitting in Babylon.

Jon: An actual Babylon?

Tim: Literal, yeah.

Jon: A literal Babylon.

Tim: It's not image yet. It will become an image but not yet. We would think this is terrible. Like this is a contradiction in God's plan. He wanted to bless the nation's for these people to be priests to the nation's but now they're miserable like capitalism Babylon.

Then surprisingly, what you see in a number of prophetic books is that they scattered among the nations, form of existence becomes the surprising way that God makes these people a kingdom of priests after all. The first place this comes real explicit statement is in Jeremiah. This is Jeremiah Chapter 29. Jeremiah lives at the same time as Ezekiel, he watched Nebuchadnezzar come to town, but he didn't get hauled off to Babylon.

Jon: He got to stay.

Tim: He got to stay until he got kidnapped and taken to Egypt with some rebel Israelites. It's an interesting part of the story. But before that happened, he was led by God, he says, to write a letter to the exiled communities in Babylon. Here's his letter. It's in Jeremiah Chapter 29. "

"Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet, sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile; the priests, the prophets, all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says

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the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'to all the exiles, I've sent in exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.'" We're just making it real clear.

Jon: Wait. Who's this too?

Tim: "Y'all build houses.

Jon: Y'all?

Tim: Well, it just says "build houses," but the point is "everybody." Y'all. Texan. "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce; take wives, become fathers have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters husbands that they may have sons and daughters, multiply there; don't decrease. Seek the shalom.

Seek the peace - some of our English translations have seek the well-being, but shalom is wholeness. Well-being is actually good translation - seek the well-being, the shalom of the city where I sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf." This is Jeremiah. Pray for whom? What does he mean to pray for the shalom of Babylon on his behalf? Who does that mean I'm praying for? I'm praying for Nebuchadnezzar.

Jon: Nebuchadnezzar and his goons.

Tim: This is crazy. Then he says, "Seek the shalom of the city and pray for its shalom on its behalf. For in its shalom, you will have shalom." Then the next phase of the letter is, "Thus says the Lord, when 70 years have been completed for Babylon, I'm going to visit and fulfill My good Word to you and bring you back."

Then here's the famous line. "For I know the plans I have for you. Plans for welfare, not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope. I'll bring you back from the place I sent you into exile."

First of all, it's this promise that this period of exile is not eternal. It's not permanent. It's a temporary measure. But while you're sitting in a place that isn't your ultimate home, make it into your home. All these images, if you're building a house and planting a garden, you're sticking around.

Jon: You're staying put.

Tim: Notice he says, "You marry and intermarry, and then make sure your kids all get married too, and your grandkids.

Jon: Increase in number?

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Tim: Yeah. Actually, that's the key hyperlink.

Jon: To Genesis?

Tim: Yes. Because that was the image all the way to humanity in the garden to be fruitful and multiply. That is the blessing that was passed on them through the family of Abraham. "I will make you fruitful so that you multiply."

Here you have even in the midst of exile, they are to live as if recalling the Garden of Eden, recalling Abraham and the promised land, and creates this image in the promised land but we do it right here in the midst of Babylon. And it's supposed to overflow out into Babylon.

Jon: You would almost expect the letter to be like, "Hey, guys, exiles out in Babylon. Let's start our plan to get out of here. Let's figure out the minimum we have to do to not get killed while in Babylon and keep ourselves separate and find a way to escape. That should be our strategy." I almost feel like that was kind of my Christian strategy was like—

Tim: Withdraw?

Jon: Like stay separate and plan my escape. That kind of was the motto of my faith.

Tim: So crazy.

Jon: I mean, implicitly, not explicitly - which is the opposite of this advice.

Tim: When your crony...What do you tell me that one acronym for Bible?

Jon: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

Tim: It's terrible.

Jon: That wasn't mine. I mean, it was just—

Tim: But you're saying it was in your church culture. I had never heard that before. This is unbelievable to me.

Jon: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

Tim: Just I can't think of a description of the Bible that's more untrue to what the Bible is actually trying to say.

Jon: Because it's not basic, it's not really instruction so much as it is a story—

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Tim: It has some instruction.

Jon: It just has some.

Tim: But it instructs through lots of creative, very different way. Anyway, let's focus on what's good, not the problem. What's good is this image of you're in exile, but you're to live as if you're recalling the promised land kind of life - Be fruitful, multiply. And you seek the shalom of...Not notice how many times it said they were exiled to Babylon in the introduction.

Jon: It made it really clear.

Tim: So by the time you reach "seek the shalom of the city, where I've sent you into exile," there's no mistaking it, is Babylon. Pray on its behalf. Right here, the seed is planted that maybe the way that Israel will become a kingdom of priests to the nations, one of the ways is by actually having been scattered among the nations to create these covenant communities where they're trying to live by the laws of the Torah, but now in an environment that forces them to rethink what [unintelligible 00:38:29] means. That's one step. Jeremiah's letter is very important.

[00:39:02]

Tim: There's this Hebrew Bible nerd named Daniel Smith-Christopher, who's written two excellent books on the theme of exile and the meaning, the theological idea of exile in the Old Testament. He has a whole section on Jeremiah's letter that was really enlightening.

This phrase, he says, "Build houses, plant gardens, get married," it's a triad. There are three images: houses, gardens, get married. You can find that those three phrases in a little triad and just a handful of other places in the Bible, and they're always describing rebuilding life after a war. In Deuteronomy 20, in Deuteronomy 28, in Isaiah 65, this triad appears about post-war rebuilding.

Jon: Post-war strategy?

Tim: Yeah. He thinks that's really strategic. Jeremiah is using posts war language to describe how you rebuild your life in Babylon.

This is what Smith-Christopher has to say. He says, "Jeremiah is not simply advising a settled existence. He's clearly using language to declare a peace ethic for the exiled community. This is confirmed by his rival -you have to read the previous chapter of Jeremiah 28. His rival his Hananiah who proclaimed that God would save Jerusalem from Babylon. His words were, 'I will bring back the king of Judah, and break the

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yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon." That's what Hananiah said would happen. It didn't happen. The opposite happened.

He says, "Between Jeremiah's call to a peace ethic and Hananiah's call to a resistance ethic," he says, we're watching a prophetic conflict about appropriate action towards Babylon. Jeremiah's call to seek the shalom of Babylon would have been heard as a direct call to abandon revolt; whether you're in Babylon or whether you're back in Israel. This is a division between Hananiah and Jeremiah on the strategy of God's people in their exilic existence. And the split, he goes on to say, is between those who advocate a limited cooperation with Babylon versus those who advocate open and frequently violent rebellion.

Hananiah's opposition to Jeremiah was the opposition of a zealot, a violent revolutionary who called on Israel to draw their swords to end the yoke of Babylon. Their argument then was both political and theological. How should we be the people of God living in a foreign land?"

That really captured my imagination that Jeremiah's call to seek the shalom, build a post-war life in the land of your captors was, first of all, an abandonment towards another option.

Jon: The Zealot option.

Tim: But it also isn't the just cloister. It wasn't a Cloister ethic.

Jon: What's a Cloister ethic?

Tim: Kind of what you were describing. Cloister's like withdraw and just build walls around your subculture.

Jon: While planning your rebellion?

Tim: Yeah, that's right. I guess those can go together. But Jeremiah says just this, "Live like you're in a time of peace."

Jon: Well, he said limited cooperation, is the phrase he uses.

Tim: That's right. Limited cooperation. And that's where we go into the book of Daniel. Because the story of Daniel becomes like quintessential embodiment of this peace ethic of Jeremiah.

Jon: Because the peace ethic, you could take it as far as saying, "Okay, let's just become complicit with Babylon."

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Tim: Correct. "They won, we lost."

Jon: Yeah. "So let's just do what they want us to do and that's fine." But it doesn't seem like you would take it that far.

Tim: Although I'm sure that was a viable temptation. I mean, think for many Israelites, they're like, "Well, I guess Yahweh, the God of Israel isn't that powerful after all. This temple got destroyed. Maybe, Marduk, god of Babylon is more powerful. We're here now." I'm sure that was very...We don't have many stories to that effect.

Jon: Would there be one where it's like, "Well, I still follow Yahweh but Yahweh wants me to just become complicit with Babylon. He'll work it out. I can just live like I'm a Babylonian"?

Tim: This is why the book of Daniel is so awesome. The Book of Daniel introduces us to a character who's trying to live out the directions of Jeremiah's letter. From the Israelite, who was a part of the royal family in Jerusalem, Daniel, and his three friends, so they get co-opted immediately into the Babylonian government because they know the international language, they are smart.

Jon: What's the international language?

Tim: Aramaic or Acadian. It was in a period of shift. They are both Semitic languages. So as you go into the book of Daniel, you get a whole narrative that's exploring this strange peace ethic, this limited cooperation.

Smith-Christopher, again, his book...I didn't say what it is. One book is called "The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile" His other book is just called "A Biblical Theology of Exile." They're both great. He has this phrase to describe Daniels posture to Babylon, which he says is a mix of loyalty and subversion.

Jon: You've used that phrase before.

Tim: Yeah. Daniel Chapter 1 tells a story of these Israelites co-opted in the Babylonian government. And what do they do? They take new names. They all have Hebrew names that have Yahweh somewhere in the name and their names all get changed to pagan Babylonian name. And they accept that as their new title.

They're dressed, we're told, like Babylonians, and they get new jobs and careers in the Babylonian government. So they're allowing their identity even, their working hours now to contribute to the machine. They're just...

Jon: Work for the man.

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Tim: ...they devour their land.

But there are moments where their identity as God's covenant people comes into conflict with their loyalty to Babylon. "We're going to be loyal to Babylon, seek it's shalom, pray for it, contribute to its well-being, but there will be moments where we're not going to cross these lines.

In chapter 1, it's eating kosher. It's like kosher food laws. What they end up doing is, they're all of a sudden, they're threatened and their lives are on the line, and they are going to happily eat the consequences. It comes that their kosher diet actually makes them even more healthy and have more strength and brilliant and so. That's Daniel Chapter 1.

But it introduces the theme of the book is that when God's covenant people are truly seeking the shalom of Babylon, there are sometimes when that loyalty will mean cooperation and partnering for the common good. But there are other times where, like Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar makes this symbolic statue of the empire and of himself, elevates it to the place of a god. And they refuse to give ultimate allegiance to Babylon. Even though they work in the government, they won't give the ultimate worship to the empire. And so they stake their lives on it.

Then it's a moment of subversion. It's like the peace ethic of Jeremiah calls God's people to this new way of living.

Jon: What were the two words?

Tim: Loyalty and subversion. Smith-Christopher, both of his books, he talks about Daniel as the paradigm. He's call that the wisdom warrior. It's such a great phrase.

Jon: It is a great phrase.

Tim: A wisdom warrior. Which means he's not passive. He's very alert in active engagement with his exilic environment, but it's a wise kind of warrior. Which means not every thing's a battle for ultimate values. So "I'll wear the clothes, I'll take the name, I'll do whatever. It's fine. It doesn't matter what name I have."

The story of Mordecai in Esther. Mordecai, that's a great name. They're an exile in the Persian period - that's when that story takes place - but at the root of Mordecai's name is Marduk, the god of Babylon. So it's a famous biblical character named after Babylonian God. It's not a big deal.

Jon: They're not that they're bummed.

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Tim: Yeah. But there do come these moments where God's people have to wisely choose to resist because this particular issue in Daniel 3 it's the friends won't worship the Empire as if it's God. Or in Daniel 6, Daniel won't pray to the king as if the king has ultimate authority. He won't offer prayer to the king as if the king is God.

Both these cases, then they engage in a form of nonviolent resistance. What they take is a form of witness. They both stand as then these witnesses before the king and they say, "Listen, I'm not trying to be a jerk here. I just worship."

Jon: "I'm not trying to take you down, but this is a line I can't cross."

Tim: Yeah. In both cases, they tell the king, "Listen, you think that you're God and actually you're not. You are subordinate to the true king of the nations, who's actually your boss, and right now you're crossing a line that you shouldn't cross. And if you're going to kill me for saying that, then feel free. My God might save me; He might not save me. That's not really the point here."

Again, Smith-Christopher, this is his summary of this portrait of the wisdom warrior of Babylon. He says, "The nonviolent peace ethic of the Hebrew exiles is a practice of radical doubt towards the self-proclaimed power and religion of the Empire. It is rooted in a conviction that God's covenant people are the primary vehicle of God's work in the world and that the nation-state is not the center of the universe.

This is the ethic of the exiled Hebrew wisdom warrior, a nonviolent resistance based on the wise awareness that the empires of this age, despite their attempts to convince otherwise are not of ultimate significance. Or in the language of Daniels visions, their dust to be swept away by the wind, while the mountain of God's kingdom stands firm forever." That's from the vision in Chapter 2.

That's what you get from this learning to be God's covenant people in exile becomes a really important part of the biblical message, is advocating this mix of subversion of the nations of this world while at the same time posing no military threat to them. And somehow that paradoxical combination just makes empires angry.

Jon: But they don't know what to do with you.

Tim: But they don't know what to do with you. You can already see this is the book of Acts. This is totally the plotline of the book of Acts is that when Paul gets in prison, what's it for? Telling good news of crucified risen Jewish Messiah. None of the Roman officials know what to do with them. But they have to prosecute him because he's in the machine now and he's been publicly accused of being a rebel. But that's exactly where God's people tend to find themselves. Anyway, I love this theme. I think to me this is really cool.

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Jon: This is really cool. It's hard to think about how it applies directly, because it's just a different political climate. Like you're not going to be killed. There's freedom of speech—

Tim: Sorry. You're talking about you and I living in a modern Western democracy kind of thing?

Jon: Yeah. It's very, very practical, but it would be much more practical if we lived in an empire ruled by some sort of monarch or something.

Tim: The analogy is different for Christians living in the modern west, in that, if a particular Western government has some kind of religious lingo to it, it's likely to come from the Jewish Christian tradition.

Jon: In the West?

Tim: In the West. Then there's this form of civil religion, like public religion and religiosity that it's mostly language and images drawn from the Bible. In the Christian tradition, I think that's what makes it seem tricky. But what I think this exilic mode of existence is Smith-Christopher's point in writing these two books was actually to say, this wisdom warrior exile ethic is the mindset that the early churches saw themselves in.

Like why does Paul in his letter for letter 1 Timothy, he has that thing about praying for your leaders? Every type of leader, pray for them. Where to get that idea? That's the Jeremiah 29 peace ethic. In that letter that Peter writes to the quote exiles, he has a whole section about submitting to whatever human institution of authority is in existence over you, and submit yourself to the king. He actually uses the word king - submit to the king.

But then at the same time, know that people are going to make fun of you and be suspicious of you because your ultimate allegiance isn't to the king. Even though you'll submit to the king, your ultimate allegiance is to King Jesus. So the New Testament apostles are just picking up this Daniel, Jeremiah mode of living in Babylon. And that shapes how they tell Christians to live.

The question I think, for us then, is to say, "For Christians living in a modern Western situation, are we supposed to foster a suspicion of our own democracies, knowing that they are a mix of good and bad but nation-states are?" But ultimately we are to probably be on the edge of more subversively loyal than to completely complicit. We're just thinking, we're just imagining.

Jon: Just imagining that it's one and the same.

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Tim: I mean, you can say some of the most dangerous periods of church history have been when Christians fully overlap their view of God's kingdom with whatever human kingdom they happened to be living in. Those are usually not proud moments in church history.

Jon: Some lousy things happen.

Tim: Anyway, Smith-Christopher, both of his books on the exile, he's not just doing his historical study. He's actually saying this is a mode of living and talking that the early Christians fully adopted. He thinks that it's the main way that the Jesus movement and Jesus followers should think of themselves in the world, which means that we will both feel at home and feel like strangers.

Jon: If you build your house and you're gardening and you're marrying, you're like, "Oh, this is our home now, but it's not our Home." But then on the flip side, let's say they're back in Jerusalem, and they're building houses and planting gardens and marrying, but it doesn't feel yet like Home the way they thought it would be, they're still using exile language, they don't now think of themselves in Babylon, though. They just consider themselves exiles in Jerusalem. Or do they actually start calling...?

Tim: Okay, so now we're to it...

Jon: Ooh.

Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. In the next episode, we turn to look at how Jesus fits into this theme of exile in the Bible. We look forward to picking up the conversation next week with you. Our show today was produced by Dan Gummel. Thanks for being a part of this with us.

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