

## Introduction

The story we're considering is a long and complicated love affair whose principal characters are Yahweh, and the nation of Israel. It is a story set within the bounds of history, going back thousands of years and continuing on into the present day.

Love affairs are by nature tumultuous things that weave and wind their ways through many and varied chapters. Our story is no different. In fact, there is a particular chapter that is very significant in the relationship in question.

This essay looks at that chapter, where both lovers feel and act totally rejected by the other, and both responds according to their individual natures.

The overall context of the story is that Yahweh has chosen Israel to be the object of His love, and Israel has been anything but reciprocal in her response. She has taken Yahweh for granted and assumed that while He is around He will 'keep her in the style she has become accustomed to', while she can and will do anything she wants. This includes turning up to His house at the right times, getting dressed as befits the occasions, and telling Him how much she loves Him. But all the while, her eyes are elsewhere as she looks to see who else she can 'schmooze' with, who else will pay her bills, and who else will be her protector.

Yahweh has enormous patience, compassion, and care for Israel despite her wayward actions. But Yahweh is not just anybody; Yahweh is King of the Universe, and that matters enormously to Him. He can't afford to let anybody disparage His reputation. So for the sake of His great name He must do something about this irascible object of His heart.

Sometimes in great love stories, the only action to take is drastic action. This is precisely what Yahweh does. In the heat of the moment when His anguish can no longer be assuaged, He leaves. Not only does He leave, He calls in a nasty character, the Babylonian Empire, to destroy Yahweh's own house and to maim and take away the object of His great love, Israel. She wanted other lovers, 'well, see how you like them apples, baby!'

Israel, dress in tatters, body broken, bruised and abused is now forced to live in Babylon – miles from her own home physically, relationally, culturally, and spiritually.

How could this happen to her? Wasn't everything going so well? Wasn't she the object of Yahweh's heart, and hadn't He promised to be with her always? How was she to make sense of all this? Was there any hope that the relationship could somehow be restored?

We must remember that this chapter is a crucial incident in the story. Each chapter affects the other, and so we need to ask how this chapter affects the chapter we find ourselves in at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So let us begin, dear reader, by turning our attention to some of the secondary characters in our story, the prophets, and ask, 'how did they help to explain what had happened, and how do their suggestions resonate with the Church's experience of exile today?'

## Jeremiah

Jeremiah, as prophet of Yahweh, has been chosen by Him to fulfil a specific mandate. Yahweh said to Jeremiah,

*'Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.'* (1:10)

It seems from the mandate that Jeremiah will be doing more destructive work than constructive, and it naturally makes him feel somewhat uncomfortable. In fact, throughout his ministry Jeremiah experiences great discomfort; not just from the awesome nature of his task, or from the physical hardships he had to endure, but also his poetic heart 'was acutely sensitive to the pain and failure of his community, and who saw in penetrating ways the failed core of Judah's life, which could not be covered over by the façade of royal self-deception.'<sup>1</sup>

So Jeremiah begins one of the classical prophetic tasks by announcing to Judah that her actions and attitudes toward Yahweh have finally gone as far as He can tolerate, and He will now take action.

Conventionality has it that Jeremiah's ministry operated from 626-581BCE, so this means that most of Jeremiah's work occurred **prior** to the Exile. Yahweh was speaking through Jeremiah to warn His lover that her actions and attitudes were so unacceptable that He was going to abandon her to her own destruction. In fact, Yahweh announces through Jeremiah that Yahweh Himself will oversee her destruction! (Jer 4:5-18).

Yahweh was dismayed that Israel's behaviour was so blatantly turned toward breaking the covenant, and yet they thought they were doing so well. He reminds Jeremiah of the terms of the covenant and how He had kept His part of it (11:1-5). He tells Jeremiah to proclaim to Israel the terms of the covenant and how He has continually warned them of the consequences of disobedience (11:6,7). He asserts that He, '...will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape'; and, 'Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them' (11:11).

Jeremiah has the touch of Moses about him as the covenant features so strongly in his oracles and poetry. Yahweh also recognises this as He tells Jeremiah not to bother with praying for them because this time they have gone too far (11:14). Their idolatry, hypocrisy, and harlotry – particularly within the Temple itself, Yahweh's own house! – is too much for any self-respecting King of the Universe to bear.

And so He announces the unbelievable: He will use the hated and feared, 'Nebuchadnezzar my servant' (25:9) to bring the promised disaster, to dismantle and destroy Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Equally unbelievable, comes the pronouncement from Yahweh through Jeremiah that Judah should submit to this judgement by going along with everything that Nebuchadnezzar wants! (27). But of course obedience doesn't come easily to Judah, and she is carried off to Babylon, banished into exile.

Today's church is caught in a similar predicament. The unbelievable is happening as the twin towers of Modernity and Christendom are collapsing as a result of the lack of credibility of their 'truth claims' which promised a better existence due to 'the inevitability of progress'. The false prophets of 'order and imperialism' are being challenged by the hated and feared bringers of newness through 'chaos, subjectivism, pluralism, and greenies.' And those same false prophets preach a message of denial saying, 'peace, peace, when there is no peace.' (6:14).

A new world in Exile awaited Israel, along with a new form of relationship with Yahweh. The establishment religion could not foresee it, neither were they prepared to accept it. The established church today would do well to re-read this chapter of the story and take

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<sup>1</sup> B. Birch, W. Brueggemann, T. Fretheim, D. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, 1999), p.328.

<sup>2</sup> see *ibid*, p.333.

the risk of moving from denial to walking in a new place in 'humility with their God.' (Micah 6).

But wait, there's more. Not only is Israel to submit to exile, they are to make themselves at home there!<sup>3</sup> (29:1-9). And while there, a letter comes to Israel from Jeremiah explaining that Yahweh has not forgotten her, that her exile is not forever, and that He is actually there with them (29:11-14).

Inside of Yahweh's pain and grief lies a heart that continues to yearn for His lover. Yahweh is not some construct of cultic worship that is tied to Jerusalem and the Temple. He is a real person capable of feeling all that any lover committed to the object of His heart would feel. He is also sovereign and free to do and act as He wills in accordance with His stature as King of the Universe.<sup>4</sup>

And Jeremiah had not forgotten his call '...to build and to plant' (1:10).

So he speaks out of the despair of hopelessness a new word of hope – that at the heart of Yahweh is the health and welfare of His people, and that He will restore them again to their own place (29:11-14).

As Brueggemann says, Jeremiah made possible the reality of *relinquishing* the old ways, and *receiving* the new world with its new ways.

In the New Testament, Jesus spoke about 'new wine and old wineskins.' He, like Jeremiah, was realistic about the pain, grief, denial, and struggle that goes with moving from old wine to new wine, because having tasted the old wine, no one likes the new. And he was also realistic about how the old wine can't be accommodated in new wineskins because those new wineskins will burst.

In the present day, the old church is having great difficulty in accepting that its ways are no longer suited to the new world that Post Modernity is heralding. It is probably as blind to its own forms of idolatry that Judah was 2500 years ago. It has probably forgotten that God is still King of the Universe, and still He insists on not being mocked. And it has probably forgotten that God is still not a construct of modernity's values, and Christendom's cultic forms.

He has a Name and Reputation to protect, and a lover to love. His way is to be free to act as He wills, for the sake of His great Name, and He will make His ways known through His relationship with His lover.

The questions we have to ask ourselves today are, 'Who is the new Jeremiah?'; 'How will we receive God's message through him?'; 'How will we respond to this new Exile?', and, 'Have we the grace to relinquish the old, and the courage to receive the new?'

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<sup>3</sup> R.W. Klein, *Israel in Exile* (Fortress Press, 1979), p.151.

<sup>4</sup> see W. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Fortress Press, 1986), p.28.

## Ezekiel

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel began his ministry before 587, so saw the approach of disaster, and worked among its consequences until 561. He began his prophetic ministry as a priest of Yahweh (1:3), having been exiled to Babylon with much of Israel's population. It was in Babylon that he received the first of his wild visions from Yahweh that intensified his already strong sense of Yahweh's holiness.

Through that sense of Yahweh's holiness, and from Yahweh's own words to him, Ezekiel was going to be a very tough character, doing a very tough job (3). Holiness is not something to be trifled with, and neither are His people.

Almost immediately after Ezekiel's call, he begins the task of prophesying in Jerusalem of the inevitability of her fall. Ezekiel is a graphic character, and Yahweh has him using symbolic imagery that is fully public, very uncomfortable, time wasting (in our modern, time-efficient sense), and offensive (4). But even in this, the toughness of Ezekiel's character is shown as he argues with Yahweh from a priestly perspective when he refuses to eat defiled food, and Yahweh relents!(4:14,15).

The prophetic task is more than nice, well-constructed sermons that everybody expects from well-educated clergy. The power of the prophet's words are often enhanced and given a different dimension by using physical drama that costs something of the poet/prophet. Stepping outside the conventions of established ritual is an uncomfortable experience for both prophet and establishment, because it assaults the sensibilities that have defined what acceptable worship of our King of the Universe actually is.

It was interesting to note that back in 1993 during U2's Zooropa tour, many in the established church thought that U2 had finally gone too far and lost sight of a coherent faith that was recognisable. With their massive, technologically brilliant show U2 were trying to demonstrate the madness of what modernity and cultural imperialism had brought us. With words like, '...everything you believe is a lie...' they challenged the world, and the world within the church, to take a fresh look at what really matters in issues of life, death, and what or Who we worship.

Yahweh seems keen to use poetic language, metaphor, and drama to get His message across to His people. One of the problems for the church today is that those kinds of people are not well understood, nor well received by the established church. More often than not they stand outside of the church's traditions, unable to stomach the weekly empty rituals that only serve to feed the dominant values of modernity and western cultural imperialism. In that sense they display something of the dispassionate observer that we see in the flint-like forehead of Ezekiel. They cannot play the game that offends the Name of a holy God who wants to make His Name known throughout the world by means of a church which is meant to live, learn, and love differently from the 'nations around it' (11:12). And so they stand apart from it, and refuse to take responsibility for it.

As Ezekiel begins his task, his flint-like forehead is set to make clear to Jerusalem that what they have always done is now to be undone. 'It is not possible for Judah or its religious establishment to hold Yahweh in thrall to its own interests. Yahweh in freedom is now to act against Judah with profound severity.'<sup>5</sup>

And so Yahweh leaves the Temple (10:18-22). The vision of the throne on wheels has surely come to pass as Yahweh moves into exile with His people.

The theology of Yahweh leaving the Temple, abandoning the Holy City of Jerusalem, and moving into exile with His people is difficult for us to understand in today's world. Our New Testament understanding of Jesus' words, 'I will be with you always' (Mtt 28:20), and Paul's words to the Romans of the inseparability of God's love for us (Rom 8:35-39) gives us the reassurance that whatever we do, wherever we go, God will be with us. Our understanding as just stated is probably how Judah felt about Jerusalem, the Temple, and Yahweh's presence. The difference is that for Judah, Yahweh was physically present *in situ*.

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<sup>5</sup> B. Birch, W. Brueggemann, T. Fretheim, D. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, 1999), p.341.

(But it must always be remembered that Yahweh went into exile with Judah – He never actually left her).

So will God leave the church? Perhaps it will be perceived that He does/has by the way the church is continually becoming more marginalised in our pluralistic world. For most of the church's 2000 year history it has been aligned with the power structures that gave it respect, privilege, security; and that gave its members a sense of blessed peculiarity, eternal worth, and in Christendom, a higher sense of citizenship status.

A very different story to that which we read in the New Testament and early church history. Then the church was just another pesky sect amidst a myriad of other religions, worthy of derision and opposition including some severe persecution. In a similar way, Israel was a 'nothing' tribe of people amidst the major nations and myriad of religions when Yahweh first called Abraham. Ezekiel calls the image to mind in chapter 16 to show that without Yahweh, Israel would be nothing. But worse, Israel used her special blessing to bring favour for herself and forgot Yahweh's gracious acts of saving kindness. Has today's church done the same thing?

But like Jeremiah, Ezekiel does not leave the people hopeless. He too, has a message of hope. But the hope doesn't come until after Jerusalem has finally fallen. What is it about human nature and human institutions that refuses to see the end approaching, refuses to take note of what can be encouraged to change and avoid heartbreak? Too often it seems that the 'bottom of the barrel' has to be reached before reality is taken cognisance of, and new hope is finally given a chance to be birthed. This certainly looks to be the case with much of the Christian Church today.

Ezekiel speaks of the images of shepherd in chapter 34, where Yahweh himself will search out His people and shepherd them properly. In chapters 35 and 36 He speaks against the nations that laughed at Israel's expense, as Yahweh perceives that they are in fact laughing at Him, and that is more than a Great King of the Universe can stand for.

And so the ingathering begins. Yahweh will act for Yahweh's own sake, but to the great benefit of Israel<sup>6</sup>. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the 'valley of dry bones' in chapter 37, introducing a resurrection theme that echoes loudly with the Christ Easter event. And new hearts and a new Spirit will be given them that will move them to follow Yahweh's laws. Hope springs eternal in the heart of the prophet as he speaks words that will renew life where once there was only the promise of death and abandonment. And thundering from heaven is Yahweh's voice as He decrees:

*Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.' (37:36)*

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<sup>6</sup> B. Birch, W. Brueggemann, T. Fretheim, D. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, 1999), p.359.

## 2 Isaiah

Unlike Jeremiah and Ezekiel, 2 Isaiah's work is set completely within the context of the Exile. 'The poet thus must be heard through the metaphor of *exile*.<sup>7</sup> And it is important to remember that this prophecy of hope comes at the historical point which sees the imminent demise of the Babylonian Empire, due to the visible presence on the horizon of the powerful Persian Empire perched like a hawk on a glove awaiting the command for release (46:11).

For those of the exile with a heart for return and eyes to see the signs of the times, the geo-political situation brings an added dimension of reality to the words of the prophet of hope. This is an important aspect of hope, because it is at least partly visible.

The geo-political aspects strengthen the theological aspect to 2 Isaiah's work. But for those without a vital theology that they allow to shape their lives, hope is still too dangerous to contemplate.

Recognising hope is the other side of recognising disaster. The hope of renewal can only come after the recognition, destruction, and grief of the disaster. Unfortunately it seems that the church in the west has yet to recognise the disaster that has begun to shake its foundations. Instead, it seems intent on speaking peace and carrying on business as usual. And if the exile paradigm is to be accepted, then even more ludicrous is the church's insistence upon renewal and revival **before** the recognition and grief of the disaster. Those in ministry seem to be running around in ever-decreasing circles trying to keep the institutional machinery ticking over. No wonder so many are exhausted!<sup>8</sup>

The other part of the argument is that exile was Yahweh's decision. Theology is at the heart of the exile. So again, the church needs to take a deep breath and accept that its place in the transitional shaking between modernity, post-modernity, and whatever comes next is not just due to a socio-political upheaval passed off as another inevitable epoch in the human story. No, at the heart of its own exilic shakings is the theological decision of the King of the Universe.

So if exile was Yahweh's decision, then homecoming is too. Yahweh has spoken words of comfort to His people, proclaimed that their penance is well and truly done, and that He personally will lead them home. 2 Isaiah announces a wonderful scene of joyous and tender procession leading back to Jerusalem (40:1-9).

And as Jeremiah foretold Yahweh's use of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Empire to take Judah into exile, so 2 Isaiah foretells that Yahweh will use Cyrus's Persian Empire to facilitate the homecoming (41). This is recognising theology in praxis. It is recognising the freedom and sovereignty of Yahweh to do what He wants. Chapter 41 focuses Israel's eyes on the theological certainty that Yahweh is truly God, while all the other gods of the nations are nothing.

This is particularly important to note in chapter 46, where the Babylonian gods, Bel and Nebo, are named. The reason for naming them seems to be to de-power them in Israel's eyes in preparation for them leaving captivity. Yahweh is truly God, while the Babylonian gods are nothing, and so are not to be feared.

It seems to me that the naming of gods is an important prophetic task in the re-firing of a vital and powerful imagination for a community of faith. Who are the gods of today's west? I would venture that they are: Money, Sex, and Power; the unholy trinity.

In chapter 47, 2 Isaiah speaks firmly about the abuse of power, and how Yahweh notices. Today's economic western imperialism that is intent on globalisation backs up its ideology with enormous military might that crushes all who dare to disagree, and manipulates world markets to keep the balance of power right where it wants it. This system produces grinding poverty for those on the margins, while keeping those in the majority sated and

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<sup>7</sup> W. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Fortress Press, 1986), p.92.

<sup>8</sup> see *ibid*, p.93.

numbed to the realities of its inequities with rampant sex and unbridled consumerism. Indeed, in the USA at the moment it is patriotic to keep shopping!

And the real tragedy is that the church in the west gives its blessing to this iniquitous system because it is hopelessly tied to the apron strings of its whore mother who gives it succour!

Yet out of poverty and suffering springs the voice of hope. Power is not the voice of hope. Hope comes from the unlikely place of the abused, the broken, the ugly, and the despised. The remarkable image of the 'Suffering Servant' who bears the 'iniquity of us all' (53:6) is certainly an unlikely saviour. And yet as the rest of the Song continues, it points out that through the unwarranted suffering of the Servant, Yahweh brings healing, restoration to life, and joyful exaltation (53:10-12),

'This is because the Servant's sacrifice, in the conviction of the prophet, represents God's gracious approach to men with power.'<sup>9</sup>

The Servant Songs call to the church down the corridors of time to retell the story of vicarious suffering from a position of weakness and humility, and to take an incarnational approach to 'becoming' a healing agent who brings hope through living out ways that re-imagine how life can be. The Christian story is exactly this, with God taking the lead and showing how it could be done through His Son, Jesus the Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> B. W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament*, (Longman Publishing, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1974), p.424.

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