

Covid-19 in Dialogue with our Biblical Traditions

As we celebrated the New Year on January 1st and perhaps made some resolutions for the following twelve months, we had no idea how different this year would be from all our expectations and hopes. The emergence and spread of the Covid-19 virus have affected the globe. The interconnectedness of all creation, such a key message of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, has been demonstrated so clearly.



Over five million people world-wide have contracted the virus and over 350,000 of these have died. Within Australia, the ensuing government regulations, intent on medically “flattening the curve”, have also led to economic, psychological, educational, social, ... hardship for many. The full extent of the multidimensional and intersectional effects of the pandemic is still being revealed to us.



While there are variations across the states, we are now beginning to emerge from our cocooned existence, with the gradual reopening of various businesses, services and activities. Some are hoping and longing to resume their pre-Covid life. Others are cautioning us that life won't be the same as it was before the virus. And still others are urging us to choose to live differently in the future, not reverting to our former ways which have left such a destructive legacy for the poorest in the Earth community, including people, and Earth itself.



With my being steeped in the experience of the Covid-19 era, the images that came to mind when I wanted to bring that experience into dialogue with the biblical tradition related to the Babylonian exile. In the 6th Century BCE, the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital Jerusalem. The king of Judah, along with many of the elite and educated of Judah, including priests (Ezekiel, for instance), was taken into exile in Babylon. Roughly ten years later, in response to a rebellion, the Babylonians looted and burned down the Jerusalem temple which had been built in the time of Solomon, more than three hundred years earlier. Another body of people was taken into exile in Babylon at that stage, leaving “some of the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil”, according to 2 Kings 25:12.



James Tissot, *The Flight of the Prisoners*

Babylon was part of Mesopotamia (which literally means “between rivers”), lying between the great Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (in modern day Iraq). For a map showing the location of Judah in relation to Mesopotamia, click on: <http://www.bibleodyssey.net/tools/map-gallery/m/map-mesopotamia> (from the Bible Odyssey website).

For the people in exile, the crisis was multidimensional. Their country had been overrun by the Babylonian King and his army, resulting in many people being forcibly moved from their homeland, “the promised land”, to a foreign country. The Jerusalem Temple, which they understood to be the dwelling place of God on Earth, had been destroyed. The monotheistic exiles were confronted by the worship of many gods in Babylon. Much of what was dearest to their hearts appeared lost.

An important challenge for the exiles was to keep their hope, their traditions and their faith alive in the midst of the chaotic disruption they were experiencing. Prophets, poets, psalmists, theologians and scribes were amongst those essential to addressing this challenge.

The poets and psalmists cried out their pain. In Psalm 137:1-4, we hear the people’s lament over the loss of their homeland Zion (Jerusalem):

*By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing our God’s song in a foreign land?*

You may remember the #1 hit in the 70s, *Rivers of Babylon*, whose chorus is based on these words. A song from Godspell, *On the Willows*, is also based on these verses of the psalm. You can hear YouTube versions of the songs from these links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYK9iCRb7S4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFmGFwqAr68>

The theologians and scribes reworked and rewrote their stories and traditions so that they would speak to their time of crisis in Babylon. Much of the material in the Pentateuch was written and compiled when they were in Babylon or after they had returned to Judah. The creation story at the beginning of the book of Genesis (1:1-2:4a), for instance, does not provide a scientific description of the origins of creation. It is not meant to do that. The story, however, that begins with dark, watery chaos (1:2) and then describes God bringing order out of that chaos in a series of creative acts would speak to the hearts of those whose lives had been turned upside down in exile. The experience of exile was a catalyst for developing a new understanding of themselves and of God’s presence in their life.

Prophets proclaimed their visions before, during and after the time of exile. In the pre-exile era, several prophets decried the destructive actions of the people and the subsequent breakdown of their relationships with their God, with each other and with the land. During the time of exile, however, the key message was that of hope. Think of Ezekiel’s image of the dry bones coming back to life (Ezek 37:1-6).

Around fifty years after the destruction of the temple, with the ascent of the Persian Empire, King Cyrus of Persia allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem. Not all returned. Some preferred to stay where they had lived for so long. Those who did return found that their rosy expectations were tempered by a harsh reality. The Jerusalem temple was eventually rebuilt but it was only a pale shadow of the temple built in Solomon’s time. [Around five hundred years later, Herod would oversee a major reconstruction and expansion of the temple.] Again, the prophets and the writers were important to inspire the people at this new time of vulnerability.

Some parts of the biblical tradition imply that the disaster that struck Jerusalem and the ensuing exile in Babylon were the results of God’s punishment of the people of Judah for their continual disregard of the covenant. This understanding needs critique. Our twenty-first century understanding is not of a God who directly intervenes in ways that over-ride human freedom of choice or go against the laws of nature. We do not interpret crises and hardships as God’s punishment. We do, however, recognise that sometimes human actions contribute to disastrous outcomes (for example, climate change).

While some aspects of our Biblical tradition call for critique, many elements of the experience of exile in our tradition speak to our experience in this Covid-19 era, and they invite us to consider the following questions:

- Are we listening to those who compose and sing/play the music that gives air to our experience?
- Are we giving attention to our poets and artists whose creativity fires our hearts?
- Are we listening to the writers and prophets in our midst, calling us to dream and live into a new vision for our Earth and the entire Earth community?
- Are we listening to what Earth itself is teaching us?

Who and what inspire us in this time?

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28/5/'20