

PARALLELS BETWEEN TWO EXPERIENCES OF EXILE: THAT OF THE CUBANS AND THAT OF THE JEWS IN BABYLON

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What was the Jewish Exile in Babylon? The people of Israel was divided into two parts after the death of King Solomon, the son of David, in the year 922 B.C.E. Ten tribes formed the northern kingdom, called “Israel,” and two tribes formed the southern kingdom, called “Judah.” The northern kingdom disappeared in 722 B.C.E., after the Assyrian invasion. The southern one lasted until 587, when the Chaldeans, the leaders of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, razed Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, and deported the upper classes (including King Zedekiah, whose eyes were plucked out after he was made to watch the slaughter of his children) and the artisans to exile in Babylon (2 Kgs 25:1-12). Ten years before, there had already been a first deportation, of which it is likewise said that only the poorest people of the land were left, 2 Kgs 24:14.

The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles —whom, by the way, he considered to be the “good figs,” in contrast to those who remained behind, the “bad figs,” Jer 24:1-10— admonishing them to adapt to their new land, because they would be there quite a while (“70 years”). ‘Build houses and dwell in them, marry and have children, seek the good of and pray for your new land, since their welfare will be your own’ (Jer 29:1-7). In fact, things went very well for many exiles, who were the cream of Israel, and who preserved and greatly developed the traditions of the people of God. It is from them that we received the first important parts of the Bible, and it is to them that we owe what we call “Judaism,” for, in order to survive as the Chosen People of God, in order to be separate (see Num 23:9) and unique witnesses to the one true God, the “Jews” (from Judah) began to emphasize distinctive emblems amidst the rampant paganism which surrounded them: circumcision, the Sabbath and a special (kosher) diet. They thus preserved and developed their identity in faithfulness to the true God.

The return to the Promised Land (when this was allowed by the new empire, Persia, in 538 B.C.E.) was neither massive nor easy. The exiles had become well-established in Babylon, so much so that the marvelous oracles of the great anonymous prophet of the late Exile known as “Second Isaiah” have been described (by N. Lemche) as “travel propaganda” to entice the installed to return in a New Exodus which will miraculously far surpass the first one (out of Egypt). Indeed, the Jewish community would flourish in Babylon for centuries, so that the most complete and authoritative Talmud is the Babylonian one, dating to the fifth century C.E. and even later.

One of the “installed” was Nehemiah, who became a high royal official under King Artaxerxes. A hundred years after the Persian “liberation,” Nehemiah laments that his ancestral land is in ruins. Reluctantly, the Persian king allows his valuable aide to go to the Promised Land in order to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and to carry out important socio-religious reforms (which were also of importance to the imperial authority). In fact, relations between those who had stayed and the returnees were not at all good. The former did not keep with any scrupulosity all that the Jews who had returned from Exile considered to be of the highest importance in order to maintain their identity as the Chosen People. Those who had remained had become mixed up with pagans and semi-

pagans (Samaritans) and intermarried. Nehemiah's colleague, Ezra, the great architect of Judaism, will attempt to force the divorce of "all the foreign women and the children born of them" with severe economic penalties: whoever did not come forward in three days' time in order to separate from the "people of the land" would have all his property confiscated, and he himself would be excommunicated (Ezra 10:1-17). This was not the first time that the issue of the right to real property would be disputed between the ones who had stayed and those who had come back: already the prophet Ezekiel, in the beginning of the Exile, had given his theological support to the exiles. He had heard that those who had stayed were sending this message to the exiles: 'remain far from the Lord, for that is why He has given this Land to us'. That is, having been deported from the Holy Land constituted a forfeit of it. Ezekiel declares that during the time that they have been absent from the Land of God, God has been with the exiles (Jeremiah's "good figs"), and God will again give them the Land of Israel, punishing the others (Ezek 11:14-21).

Parallels with the Cuban Exile. It is not necessary to rack one's brains to see the parallels between the two exiles. The Cuban exile still preserves an elite character with respect to the people who have remained in Cuba. Communist rule has turned many customs and traits of pre-1959 Cuba topsy-turvy, but these are maintained in a somewhat static mode, great nostalgia and no little zeal among the exiles—it reminds me of the complaint by an Italian about how Italian-Americans who had been here for years had such a quaint, unchanged notion of Italy. The Cuban exiles often think of themselves as the true bearers of "Cubanity," despite having been more than a generation outside their country. According to them, it would be necessary to return to Cuba (when this becomes possible) to restore the true values of the fatherland, a bit (or a lot) like Ezra and Nehemiah tried to do (not wholly successfully, as the scholars tell us). And in fact we witness, reading "Third Isaiah," that the postexilic community was divided, and would thus remain for centuries, until the successors of the Pharisees, the rabbis, were able to put an end to the great pluralism which characterized Second Temple Judaism (520 B.C.E. - 70 C.E.) and impose their rather rigid version of what it meant to be a good Jew. But before this occurred, the more "open" ("universalist") tendency, represented by Second and Third Isaiah (Isa 40-66), in conflict with the more "closed" orientation of Ezra and Nehemiah, issued in an apocalyptic movement which proclaimed that the time had been completed and that the Kingdom of God had drawn near, and that it was necessary to bring this good news to all peoples. The impetus for this new Jewish sect came from a certain Jesus of Nazareth . . .