

HISTORY AND EFFECT OF EXILES ON THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

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Abstract

War, as it is said, is an ill-wind that blows nobody good. Exile too, is not infrequently believed to be occasioned with terrible suffering, disabilities and political impotence of the subject people. In some circles, there is a holding that when the Babylonians overran Judah, that Judah was heavily depopulated and life and sacrificial worship in Palestine were maimed seriously. This work will not swallow this view hook, line and sinker. It is also believed that the Exiles were unhappy and faced a very hard time in so much so that they steadfastly set their eyes on Zion as Psalm 137 implies.

Introduction

According to Ackroyd, (1970) the beginning of exiles is marked by a major disaster in the life of the Judean kingdom, the Babylonians carried the cream of the society of Judah and Jerusalem into exiles, leaving only the poorest of the land. The temple was burnt down and its treasure looted (2kings 25:13). Many of the inhabitants scattered, either driven out by the invading armies or going voluntarily into remoter areas like Moab, Edom or among Ammonites. The exiles have much impact on the people of Judah. They lost their factors of unity, land kingship, monarchy, Ark Temple and cult, which they hoped could never happen. There arose different interpretations of the exile by various groups of the Israelites which was two-sided.

Popularly, it is either that God has been overpowered by a more powerful force or he is acting in history to make his power known to his people on account of their disobedience through great prophets. However, this work main concern or focus is on the effects of this Babylonian exile on the people of Israel.

BRIEF HISTORY OF BABYLONIAN EXILE

The decline of Assyrian power made the vassal states including Judah to began to stir for freedom. Josiah succeeded by degree in from Assyrian domination. He not only initiated a thorough religious reforms but also removes all religious importations (2 kings 23:4, 23:8), which points to a complete revocation of the vassal relationship, (Ackroyd, 1970). He also stopped paying Assyrian tribute. He undertook an expansionist policy to realize his political dream of a united Israel under the ruler ship of Davidic house. However, his life, reign and revival program came to an end when he opposed Pharoah Necho at Megiddo (2 kings 23:29), Josiah's successor, Jehoahaz was after three months, deposed and punished by Necho (2 kings 23:33), probably because he continued in his father's policy. Necho personally appointed Eliakim as king and changed his name to Jehoiakim (a demonstration of supremacy over Judah).

Egypt's brief rule in Palestine ended with the emergence of Babylonia which had to contend with Egypt before taking full control of Syria-Palestine. Nebuchadnezzar then a crowned prince Egypt at Carchemish in 605 BC and became the overlord. After three years of allegiance, the bloody despot, Jehoiakim sought to evade Babylon sovereignty, (2 kings 24:4). Nebuchadnezzar sent troops from Babylon, Moab, Edom and Ammon against Judah. It was however, not until 598 BC that Nebuchadnezzar punished Jerusalem by besieging her.

The Fall of Judah and Captivity

Nebuchadnezzar's reprisal measures however fall to Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin. He reigned only three months before surrendering and was deported to Babylon with his family and retinue including his leading officials. The temple and palace treasures were carried as booty, thus, the cream of the society was exiled to Babylon (2 kings 24:12-16). King Jehoiachin as a deposed king in Babylon and appeared to have been regarded by the exiles as the last and rightful king of Judah. After this first deportation, only the poorest of the land were left behind, probably the old and the weak.

After the deportation of 597 BC and 587 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had to intervene again in 582 BC, probably due to disturbance following the wake of Gedaliah's assassination. The cream of the Jewish leadership was taken leaving the poorest element to harvest crops (Jer.29:10; 2 kings 25:12). By paralyzing the country in this manner, Nebuchadnezzar effectively removed the threat of national revival. The land was left under such a wreck that even under favorable conditions, it would have taken years to recover. Many Jews finding the economic and political conditions intolerable migrated to Egypt to start a new life, (Ackroyd, 1970).

The Babylonian exile though came as a surprise was forewarned by some pre-exilic prophets such as Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah. Jeremiah was both a pre-exilic and exilic 4 prophet who bridges the disaster to Judah. He was the authentic voice of Yahwism, speaking as it were out of tune to the dying nation. He always reminds Judah of the impending doom which was Yahweh's righteous judgment upon her for her breach of the Mount Sinai covenant. With the fall of Jerusalem, Jews drifted far and wide into other lands and sought refuge and this marked the beginning of Jews in Diaspora, a trend which would ever be permanent.

EFFECT OF THE ON ISRAEL

Exile was a shocker to them, as death of Josiah carried away with it any hope of reuniting the Israelites under Davidic kingship. The assurance of Yahweh's eternal choice of Zion as his earthly seat and his unconditional promises to David of a dynasty that would never end had however been dealt with a mortal blow. Their experience was devastating as it had been sudden, owing to the fact that Judah had followed the advocacy of false prophecy and lived idolatrous life for years. Although people like Jeremiah tried to warn them against such way of life and predicted the folly of foreign alliance in the face of Yahweh's punitive instrument. The despair that followed when the false prophets and political opportunists were proved to be wrongly dealt a crushing blow to the morals of the beleaguered Judeans

Apart from the shame of catastrophe, Ackroyd (1970) stressed that there were also the psychological effects of deportation into a strange land whose geographical features were far from being familiar to the people. A forcible transfer of a hill-dwelling people into a land of enormous unending plains is a very serious affair, inviting the tucking terrors of agoraphobia as the least result of the ensuing psychological traumata. The impression that they had been betrayed by their rulers and abandoned by their God would precipitate an immeasurably acute, emotional and spiritual crisis. The exile was a surprise because of their hope on Zion's inviolability as they had evidence where they had an encounter with the Assyrian and God smote them. Though there were equipped and armed, but God promised his chosen not to fear. The angel of the lord fought for them and killed thousands Assyrians by night, while others were burdened with bubonic plague, with this miraculous defeat, the impression of Zion's inviolability was solidified thereby daring the warnings of the pre-exilic prophets (Isa. 10:24-27).

The main implications of the exiles were of three-fold, encompassing all the matters in Israelites' life. The three factors of unity which distinguished them from other people were nearly made worthless. Though these factors still exists in some forms, yet were no longer seen in their original state. The effect of their loss was felt to a large extent and it raised a lot of questions in their minds.

The Loss of Land

The shock started with the loss of land. Ralph (1978) rightly observes that the land was gone'. The land which God promised to Abraham and his seeds forever as a mark of choosiness became a problem to them in this exilic period. For in the beginning, God said '...to your descendants I will give this land, (Gen.17:14). The exile felt the loss of land as can be seen in Psalm 137:4; '...how can we sing the lord's song in a strange land?' They decided to hang up their musical instruments they did not feel happy of their land of captivity. The people of Judah felt the impact of land so greatly that they lament; 'their inheritance has been turned over to strangers' (Lam. 5:2). And that the people has sojourned in the land for long, and had become familiar with it, so that if they eventually forced out of it or made to dwell in fear in it, it would hurt them greatly.

Loss of monarchy

Judah lost their great institution of monarchy during exile. The institution of monarchy in Israel has been a thing of contradiction as some people are for and others against its being divinely instituted. Initially, when the Israelites brought up the question of kingship with the reason that they wanted to be like other nations, God was not pleased with them, (Rowley, 1946). They said, '...appoint for us a king to govern us like all other nations' (1 Sam.8:5). Samuel the then high priest was not pleased too because it all meant that the people of Israel has rejected Yahweh as their king and were looking for human governance and lordship. For thus said Yahweh, '....for they have not rejected you (Samuel) but they have rejected me from being king over them...' (1 Sam.8:7-9). God was reluctant to give them a king that they imposed on themselves which later had some bad implications that were not favorable. The kingship was then inferred as sinful, but still of God. It was sinful because they rejected God as their King. However, the institution of monarchy later slipped out of their hand due to their sin to God which

annoyed him. The loss of Davidic kingship came during the exile period, Jehoiakim was deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar with the palace retinue and their captors appointed a king of his own heart over them because they have no say again in their government policies. They lost their human rights as a nation. Israelites kingship line ended with Zedekiah with the appointment of Gedaliah as governor over those who remained in Judah. The institution was dented in Judah when captured and their captors scoffed their kings, and of their rulers, (Hab. 1:10). There were no regards for them; neither did they really see them as monarchs.

Destruction of temple and cult

The destruction of the temple was a thing of shock to Judah. The temple area within the city was held up by magnificent support and had the standard of the ancient world. Its building started during David's time but could not be completed due to warfare,(1 sam.5:3). So God promised David that his son Solomon would build the temple, '...your son whom I will set upon your throne in your place shall build the house for my name'. (1 king 5:5). The building of magnificent temple was not an easy task and it took many years to complete. Their shock when the temple was burnt down was as a result of the strong belief in the inviolability of Zion. The treatment was severe, it raised some panic. It was a big loss. Imagine the temple which was built on God's name has been made a heap of ruins, (1 king5:5). The worshippers of Yahweh who recognized the pulled temple was also affected after all their efforts to focus at Jerusalem temple for worship. But it was defiled by people who did not know its worth.

Conclusion

In understanding the exile and its effect on the people of Israel, one should firstly remember that there was always God's intervention in Israel's life-course. Their exile has then posed a lasting question in the history of Israel. If they understood all the events in accordance with God's intervention, was it then God who took them into exile? Undoubtedly, it was God's intention because right from the start, there had been this abandonment of God by his chosen people. They had continually neglected the mercies of God and depended on their own powers and of foreign gods who could not even salvage or comfort them. It was then clear that God was not just interested in punishing his people to exhibit his power, but they did not keep his ordinances and statutes. Yahweh therefore gave Judah as captives to their enemy, Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, their king at this period with his army, made a breach and took away Judah into exile,(586 B.C). The exile had a lot of effects in their lives, due to their initial false-hope of Zion's inviolability. But all of a sudden, the exile came and they lost three factors of unity- land, kingship, temple and cult. This however led to their doubting the invincibility of God.

Finally, the people of Judah had much experience from their exile. God is still in control and had achieved his goals as he changed them completely from their exile experiences. In fact, he made them turn a new leaf. Their religious faith was intact, which implies that they could pray for their enemies. God's universal and majestic power was highly recognized and appreciated by the Exile (i.e., people of Judah).

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