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The Interpretation of the Exile and Restoration

PETER R. ACKROYD

THE EVENTS of the sixth century B.C. produced a manifold reaction among the members of the Jewish community, and from its prophets and thinkers there emerged various writings expressing these reactions: in the prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah, and in the historico-theological works of the Deuteronomic and Priestly schools.[1] We may also recognize the way in which, from these various reactions, centring on the idea of the acceptance of the reality of divine judgment and looking towards the hope that a new people of God might be truly responsive to his renewed and continuing grace, lines of interpretation stretch out into the following period. The handling of the sixth century B.C. is not solely a problem of historical reconstruction; it is also a matter of seeing how an historic experience could become a symbol of a certain understanding of the life of a people.

I. Exile

In an important passage which occurs twice in the book of Jeremiah, the substitution of a new *confessio fidei* is indicated:

> So, the days are coming—oracle of Yahweh,
> when it shall no longer be said:
> As Yahweh lives who brought up the people of
> Israel from the land of Egypt,
> but
> As Yahweh lives who brought up the people of
> Israel from the north-land and from all the
> lands into which he had driven them; and I will bring
> them back upon the land which I gave to their
> forefathers (Jer. 16:14–15 and, with some variants, 23:7–9).

A "new Exodus" is to be the central element in the faith, in the place of the "old Exodus"; such is indeed very much the emphasis of Deutero-Isaiah. But when we look at later passages in which the *confesio fidei* is again expressed (in Neh. 9 or Judith 5) we find that, though some reference is certainly made to the later events, there is no substitution of a new act of deliverance for the original one. A very modest reference is made to the exile and to the change of fortunes which followed it:

1. This article represents part of the conclusion of a forthcoming study of the whole period of the exile and restoration; it has been presented in this form at several universities and theological schools in Canada and the United States. I am grateful for the comments and questions which it has aroused.

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So you gave them into the power of the foreign peoples, but in your great mercy you did not make an end of them nor forsake them, for you are a God merciful and gracious (Neh. 9:30f.).
But when they had departed from the way which he appointed for them, they were utterly defeated in many battles and were led away captive to a foreign country. . . . But now they have returned to their God, and have come back from the places (*lit.* "dispersion") to which they were scattered, and have occupied Jerusalem, where their sanctuary is, and have settled in the hill country, because it was uninhabited (Judith 5:18f.).

In other words, the assessment is not made in terms of the Exodus, of a new act of deliverance, but rather in terms of the continuing mercy and grace of God which operates in spite of the fact that justice demanded the destruction of people and land. Such an emphasis is particularly characteristic of the Chronicler who, while alluding to the Exodus theme in sermons and prayers, passes over the event itself altogether. He thus offers what is essentially a non-historical interpretation of his people's past and present experience.

There is a recognition here that the exile is not in fact comparable with the period of the Exodus. At no point in the Exodus narratives is it suggested that the people in Egypt were brought into subjection by reason of their own sinfulness. The *vaticinium ex eventu* of Genesis 15:13f. offers simply a "factual" statement of the experience of slavery, and whereas a link could have been made between the envy and sin of Joseph's brothers and the subsequent events seen as punishment, instead the link is made between men's evil intentions and God's overruling goodness (Gen. 50:50). But the exile could not be so treated. It is true that estimates of it varied, but in general the stress lies on the punishment, acknowledged to be just, of the people's failure. So restoration, as viewed by those who experienced it and by those who later considered it, is not simply a great act of deliverance viewed against the background of the evil of the nations (though themes connected with this play their part in the pictorial representation of the restoration); it is an act of mercy, a restoration brought about solely by the willingness of God to have his people again in their own land. It is "for his name's sake."

Alongside this kind of development of thought, we may see that of the Chronicler, who is deeply conscious of the providential care of God, but who also attempts a more precise description of the exile so as to bring out its inner meaning. The narrative of the final disaster to Jerusalem is punctuated by statements of the reasons for it:

Yahweh the God of their fathers sent to them by the agency of his messengers, and kept on sending, because he had pity on his people and his dwelling-place. But they simply kept on mocking the messengers of God and despising his words and scoffing at his prophets until the anger of Yahweh came up against his people till there could be no healing (2 Chron. 36:15f.).

When the disaster takes place, this comment is made:

He exiled to Babylon the remnant which survived violent death, and they became slaves to him and his descendants until the rule of the kingdom of Persia. This was to fulfil the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah: Until the land has *paid off* its sabbaths. All the days of desolation it kept sabbath, to complete seventy years (36:20f.).

The allusion to Jeremiah, which in fact covers only the one phrase "seventy years" (Jer. 25:11; 29:10), is accompanied by an allusion to the final peroration of the "Holiness Code" in Leviticus 26:

If then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they then *pay off* their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac; even my covenant with Abraham I will remember, and the land I will remember. The land will be abandoned by them and it will *pay off* its sabbaths in its desolation without them and they will *pay off* their iniquity (Lev. 26:41–43, cf. 34).

The interpretation of the exile by the Chronicler thus depends upon a passage in which the exile is regarded as related to the disobedience of the people, but is also given a more precise meaning in relation to the sabbath.

Here we must recognize two possible interpretations of the root *rāṣā*, here in relation to the people's sin; so too the third occurrence. It could also have this meaning in its second occurrence in relation to the sabbaths. In some way, not clearly specified, the period of the exile means a paying off or counting off of sabbaths (or sabbatical years) which have not been properly observed and are therefore now to be substituted for in an enforced observance. The emphasis is on punishment and atonement; through the exile the sins of the past are dealt with—as also in Isaiah 40:2, where the same root is used. But an alternative interpretation may be obtained by treating the root here as meaning "to enjoy" and more particularly "to be acceptable (to God)." In this case we might say—using modern terminology—that the Leviticus passage plays upon two distinct roots. The people are *paying off* their sin, and while they do so the land in its desolated state is *enjoying* its sabbaths and hence is being made acceptable to God. There is a period of enforced fallowness, comparable with the sabbath years of the law (cf. Lev. 25). The fact that the Chronicler quotes only the one phrase from the Leviticus context suggests that this was the interpretation in his mind. The exile is not viewed by him simply in terms of punishment—though this is evident enough in the context—but also in terms of the recuperation needed for the new life of the post-exilic period.

Such a link with the seven-year law (and also with the Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25:8ff.) is also presupposed by the later use of the same idea in Daniel 9. Here the interpretation of the seventy-year period, taken literally in some measure by both Zechariah (1:12) and the Chronicler, is linked with the weeks of years which mark the sabbath periods of years, and the whole period from the fall of Jerusalem to the restoration under Judas

Maccabaeus becomes a period of sabbaths. It is in effect an exile lasting 490 years. With this interpretation we reach an understanding of the exile and restoration which takes us well beyond the consideration of the sixth century. For here the exile is no longer an historic event to be dated in one period; it is much nearer to being a condition from which only the final age will bring release. Bound to the historical reality of an exile which actually took place in the sixth century, the experience of exile as such has become the symbol of a period, viewed in terms of punishment but also in terms of promise (cf. Dan. 9:24). The understanding of the exile is clearly enlarged beyond the temporal framework of seventy years and the precise period covered by Babylonian captivity in the stricter sense. The desecration of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes is here regarded as a continuation of that desecration which belonged to the exilic age. A true limit to the exile is now being set.

It is in this way of thinking that we may see the truth of that type of interpretation of the post-exilic age, found particularly in the writings of C. C. Torrey, which stresses the fact that the exile gradually came to be seen as of paramount importance: a great divide between the earlier and later stages, but one which it was necessary to traverse if the new age was to be reached. Only those who had gone through the exile, whether actually or spiritually, could be thought of as belonging to the people of God. The rebuilt Temple was dedicated by returned exiles and those who, forsaking the abominations of the land, joined themselves to them (Ezra 6:21). The Chronicler shows too that in the times of apostasy in the past—at the division of the kingdom, or in the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah—there could be held out the possibility that the faithful who thus separated themselves could rejoin the community (cf. 2 Chron. 11:13ff.; 30; 34:6f., 33). This is an appeal for a gathered community, based on the recognition that the experience of the exile, the experience of judgment, can be appropriated either by virtue of having gone through it,[2] and so the impetus again and again is shown as coming from returned exiles (the "remnant" of 2 Chron. 36:20), or by accepting its significance by the abandonment of what belongs to it, namely uncleanness, pollution of the land.[3] In this the Chronicler is properly elaborating that aspect of prophetic teaching which stressed the absolute necessity of exile,[4] the principle that God's dealings with his people in the future must depend upon a repudiation and destruction, of which the exile provides the classic instance.

Later echoes of this kind of teaching are to be found in the reinterpretation of the exilic period and the restoration, in Daniel and other apocalyptic works. We may also wonder to what extent it is an element in New Testament thinking as well, for while it is clear that Exodus terminology is often

2. Proof of this may be furnished by means of genealogies, real or fictitious.
3. Cf. the interpretation of Josh. 24 as representing an appropriation of the Exodus events as religious history by those who had not actually experienced them.
4. Cf. Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

dominant (e.g. in the concept of redemption), the theme of captivity to sin suggests other overtones too. Certainly Babylon becomes the symbol for the hostile world which is eventually to be overthrown by God in the final age (cf. Rev. 16:12ff., 19; 18:2ff.), and Babylonian captivity becomes the symbol for the bondage from which release is to be found (cf. Rev. 18:4ff, and also the use of the term "Babylonish Captivity" in the mediaeval period). These are indications of the way in which the terminology of exile and restoration has entered into later thinking.

II. Restoration

The thought of the exilic age concerning restoration and its nature also had its repercussions in the period that followed, and these may be conveniently considered under the three themes of the Temple, the New Age, and the People's response.

(i) *The Temple.* It is sometimes suggested or implied that, at the fall of Jerusalem, the point had been reached when, under the influence of the personal and spiritualized religious conceptions of Jeremiah, it would be possible to see the end of the institutional religion of the pre-exilic period.[5] Not infrequently such statements are followed by a tracing of the evolution of new institutions during the exilic period: sabbath, synagogue, circumcision, as substitutes for the older practices. More important, the point is then made that, after this high degree of spiritualization, typified further in Deutero-Isaiah, there is a sad decline into the bricks-and-mortar-Temple mentality of post-exilic Judaism. Quite apart from the inadequacy of such an evaluation of Jeremiah, which misses the deeper significance of his strictures upon contemporary religious practice, it is clear that in fact the post-exilic period represents a natural development from the thought of the exilic age in the direction of a right understanding of the nature of the presence of God, of which the Temple is the most potent symbol.[6] It is not that the Temple as such is a guarantee, any more than Jeremiah would permit it to be one, but that it is the outward sign of that manifestation of divine presence and power which is essential for any kind of reorganization or establishment of the common life. Stress upon the centrality of God in exilic and early post-exilic prophecy and other writings makes it clear that there is here no necessarily narrow or pedestrian thinking, but a legitimate attempt, in the terms most readily available, to solve that most persistent dilemma of man's religious experience, the gulf between God and man himself. The Temple is the symbol of that presence which God chooses to give. It is as improper to concentrate our whole attention upon the recurrent tendency of man to see the symbol as the reality as it is to judge the contemporaries

5. Cf. e.g. the recent work by N. K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 267.
6. Cf. R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), especially pp. 135–40.

of the pre-exilic prophets solely in terms of the condemnations uttered by the latter, or the Pharisees in the time of Jesus solely in terms of his most virulent criticisms. The essential basis of thought about the Temple is that of the mediation of divine life and power at the will of the deity himself. From this various lines develop.

We may see, in the post-exilic period, the development of that deepened love of the Temple, that adherence to Zion, which is expressed so richly in the Psalter (itself coming to be the vehicle not only of public worship but also of intense private devotion). The temple is the focus of much of their religious life for those (either outside Palastine or in its remoter areas) who could hope to visit the Temple itself only very rarely, if at all. The picture which the Chronicler provides of joyous worship, the evident ardour and love for the Temple, even if often tinged with superstition, which are reflected in the opposition to both Jesus and Stephen: these are indications of how deeply rooted this affection became. If it came to be wrongly superstitious, we must nevertheless attest to the fact that the final destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 did not result in that disastrous end to Judaism which must have occurred had there been nothing but superstitious veneration. On the contrary, Judaism survived that disaster without losing the essential value of the Temple as focus.

Further, we may see how the thought of the exilic age, and after, concerning the extension of the principle of the divine dwelling of the Temple to the idea of a holy city, a holy land, was an indication both of the limitations of a too narrowly based conception, and also of the richness of the idea. The centrality of Zion, not only for the life of Judaism but also for the life of the world, made it logical to think in terms of a holy land. See for example the last chapter of the book of Zechariah, where the multitude of worshippers necessitates the sanctifying of all the vessels in Jerusalem and Judah to serve the needs of those who come to the holy city (Zech. 14: 20–21). This provision is made for the survivors of the nations who, having gone against Jersualem, now come to worship annually at the feast of booths. The place which is occupied in the conceptions of the final age by pictures of a new and heavenly Jerusalem is another aspect of this development.

In the New Testament, these lines of thought are elaborated in the understanding of Jesus himself as the Temple, as that place in which God chooses to manifest himself and in which, therefore, his power and presence are made known and operative. Thus the Christian community did not abandon Temple ideology, but rather concentrated it in the understanding of a person in whom the glory of God was revealed, and in whom God could be said to tabernacle among men, as he had chosen to reveal himself in the shrine. The destruction of the Temple is linked with the death of Jesus; its restoration is effected in his resurrection. Neither Gerizim nor Jerusalem offers finality, but worship will be in him (John 4:21; cf. also Rev. 21:22).

From this view of Jesus there develops the understanding of the Christian community as itself the Temple of which Christ is the chief corner-stone (1 Cor. 3:16f.). By further extension, this idea applies to each member of that community, whose body is itself a Temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19).

(ii) *The New Age.* The expectation that a new age was about to dawn, so amply expressed in the prophetic writings of the exilic and restoration periods, and linked both with political happenings and still more with the revealed willingness of God to come again to his people, is an aspect of thought which finds large-scale development in the subsequent centuries. Thought on this subject is so rich that any summary does less than justice to the hopes which were expressed not only in new works, particularly, in the later years of the post-exilic period, in apocalyptic writings both canonical and extra-canonical, but also in the reinterpretation of older works (notably of particular passages of psalmody and prophecy). Much of this material is very familiar because of its recognized importance for the understanding of the New Testament, and also because of the expression of this kind of thinking in the Qumran documents. I propose to comment only very briefly on three points.

The first is the recognition that the new age is of cosmic significance, and involves not simply the final establishment of God's promises to Israel, but also a complete renewal of the life of the world. This prospect is expressed in terms of a reversal of the present untoward condition of nature (cf. Isa. 55: 12f.; 65:25; 11:6–9; and also e.g. Rom. 8:19–22). This statement of reversal is to be seen against the background of thought disclosed in the older material in the opening chapters of Genesis (Gen. 2–3), which is now, in the final form of the Priestly Work, given a new context and a new significance in relation to the later creation material of Genesis 1, with its reiterated emphasis on the goodness of God's creation. The same view of the world is further expressed in the account of the repeated failures and promises which follow on the initial failure of man, with its consequences in the life of the natural world (cf. e.g. Gen. 6:1–4; 5–7; 11:1–9). In the ultimate reordering, the centrality of Israel is a centrality of promise, and expresses to the nations the purpose of God towards all men. The narrowness of particularism and the breadth of universalism are held together in the understanding that what God does for his people of his own choosing is significant for, and is to be recognized as significant by, all the nations.

The second point concerns the place of the Davidic line in relation to this new age. This is expressed in various prophetic writings of the period (Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah) as well as in elaborations of earlier prophetic material, where older royal oracles have probably been given a wider connotation. The emphasis in this material varies. The Davidic hope is hardly present as a real hope for the future in the Deuteronomic history, though the adumbration of a future Davidic line is there. In the Priestly Work it has found no place, except in so far as the royal house

is replaced by the priesthood. But subsequently, in the Chronicler, a compromise line of development is found, in which the concentration of attention on what David achieved means that, while the Davidic monarchy no longer exists, and virtually no hope remains for its restoration, what Davidic monarchy essentially stood for is achieved in the life of the purified post-exilic community, in its Temple and worship. The Davidic hope has there been refined, and again we may see how the Chronicler directs attention to theological, rather than to historical, realities.

Alongside this there are other lines of thought, culminating in the more purely political Davidic-type hopes of later nationalistic groups.[7] On the one hand, some modifications in this way of thinking would appear to be linked to the actual political conditions; thus the modification of Ezekiel's projected organization can be traced in the dual leadership envisaged in Haggai and Zechariah, and subsequently further modification resulted from the increasingly prominent position of the high priest,[8] representing a link back to the Priestly Work, while on the other hand, the idealistic conceptions of the exilic age, themselves linked with still older ideals, are at work to give rise to other, less obviously politically connected, thought. The linkage between the new age and a central figure who both embodies divine rule and is himself the guarantee of its reality is an idea of considerable importance for later Messianic thought.

The third point concerns the deferment and actuality of a new age. It is evident from what we know of the history of the post-exilic period that the new age, anticipated by both the exilic and restoration thinkers, did not materialize. To that extent, therefore, there is always an element of deferment in the vision of the new age. (The same point may be noted in the thinking of New Testament times concerning the parousia.) But to picture the development of eschatological thought solely in terms of deferment would be erroneous. The projection into the future of the hopes of a new age is not simply a matter of dissatisfaction with the present, of disillusionment resulting from the deferment of hope. It is a recognition rather of the future fullness of what is already tasted as reality. The prophets of the restoration period were both idealists and realists; as such they were able to see in the realities of a not very encouraging situation the earnest of what they believed to be present, namely, a new age with the glory of God at the very centre of the community's life. To us the age of the Chronicler, in the aftermath of Ezra's reform and with the Samaritan schism an ugly reality and a serious challenge, may well seem somewhat of a disappointment, in view of the high hopes which were evident in the work of Ezra. But to the Chronicler, whose sense of the realities is equally acute, this was the age of the fulfilment of promise. The reality of the embodiment of the rule of God in history which the New Testament proclaims is not a denial of that earlier

7. Cf. S. Mowinckel, *He that Cometh* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), pp. 155ff.
8. Cf. E. Bevan, *Jerusalem under the High Priests* (London: Longmans, 1912), pp. 5f.

sense of its reality, but a deepening and enlarging of its meaning. Nor does the fact that the new age has still not fully come alter the reality of Christian confidence that it is possible to live here and now in the context of that new age.

(iii) *The People's Response.* The problem for the exilic thinkers, in the face of failure, was to find a means by which the future people should really embody the divine will. Having laid their stress upon the priority of divine action, and the reality of the new age in which the new life would be lived, they were much concerned with this question of mechanism. The development of thought connected with this problem is again very broad; it may be briefly analysed along three main lines. In the first place, there is the response of piety, which we have already linked with the idea of the Temple. The maintenance of worship, the development of the synagogue, the marked emphasis on prayer which becomes increasingly clear in the later post-exilic years, all indicate a deep concern with the inner life of both individual and community to ensure the condition in which the blessings of God can be appropriately received. In the second place, the evolution of law, already a dominant element in earlier thinking, but coming to occupy an increasingly important place in the later period, and especially in post-biblical Jewish writings, is marked both by a concern with the purity of the people's life—shown especially in the mass of ritual law—and also by the concern to cover every aspect of life—shown in the inevitable development of casuistry. While such casuistry has been criticized, it was at heart a right casuistry, for though, like all legal developments in religion, it readily came to be thought of in terms which denied the divine prerogative and suggested the possibility of coming to terms with God, it nevertheless expressed the recognition that no part of life is outside the concern of God, and that the completely fit community is one in which all life is brought under his control. The New Testament criticisms of the wrong understanding of law must never conceal the fact that the Christian movement found itself deeply indebted to that sense of divine control which belonged to the Jewish community in which the early church came into being, and from which it only gradually separated itself, and that the church found it immediately essential, with a renewed understanding of the place which law occupies in the religious life, to evolve its own ethical teaching on the basis of the older law and of the fundamental principles which its founder had stressed. In the third place, the increasing importance of wisdom material in the post-exilic period is itself a witness to this same concern with the fitness of the community. If we are right in understanding wisdom as part of that mechanism by which life is to be rightly ordered, so that the counsel of the wise can stand alongside the *tōrā* of the priest and the word of the prophet (Jer. 18:18; cf. Ezek. 7:26), then it is clear that the sometimes apparently pedestrian concerns of the wisdom teachers are in fact directed towards that right ordering of life which is part of the necessary response of the

community and all its members. The recognition of this role of wisdom may perhaps be reflected in the greatly increased influence of wisdom thought in both Old Testament and apocryphal works.[9]

From all that has been said, it follows that both the idea of the exile, as symbol of divine judgment accepted and experienced, and the idea of restoration, expressed in concern for the right response to what God has done, may be seen to be influential in determining some of the patterns in that rich texture of thought which we may trace in the post-exilic period, that often obscure, but immeasurably important, part of Old Testament history, without which neither the developments of the intertestamental period nor the appearance and impact of Christianity can be understood.

9. On this last point, cf. the recent study of H. H. Guthrie, *Wisdom and Canon* (Evanston: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1966), especially pp. 10–28.