

A Letter to the Exiles

29: 1-32

DIG: What question does this letter answer for the exiles? Why did Jeremiah debunk those prophesying an early return to Judah? What is God's reason for the length of the exile and the reason for ending it? What message did ADONAI send to the exiles about those left behind in Jerusalem, as well as the false prophets Ahab and Zedekiah? How do Jeremiah's superiors learn of his letter to the exiles? Why was Yirmeyahu regarded as a crazy maniac if some of his prophecies had finally come true (like with Hañaniah)? Should Sh'ma'yah's letter come as any surprise to Zephaniah the high priest? What do the two prophecies - Hañaniah in Jerusalem and Sh'ma'yah in Babylon - have in common? What clues do you see to spot false prophets?

REFLECT: Do you think God uses Satan to accomplish His purposes? What are some examples of that in the Bible? In your life? What happened? Could there have been an easier way to learn that lesson? Do you often rub people the wrong way, or do you blend in pretty well? Is criticism harder for you to take in person or in writing? Why? When's the last time you gave criticism successfully?

596 BC during the eleven-year reign of Zedekiah

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) attacked Christian beliefs and morality. He was a German fatalist who believed that our existence is pointless and that **God** is dead. He did, however, believe in the fullest development of which people are capable of in this life. Then again, Christ is certainly no less concerned than Nietzsche that we should receive the fullest development of which we are capable. The difference between Nietzsche and **Christ** lies in the moral method by which the personality is put into possession of itself and its resources - in the one case by asserting itself, in the other by losing it . . . We complete our personality only as we participate and serve in the important movement of the society in which we live. Isolation means obstructed development. The aggressive egotist is working his own moral destruction by stunting and shrinking his true personality. Helping others and sympathy are the only conditions under which a true personality can be shaped. And if we asked how a society so crude, imperfect, amoral, and even immoral, as that in which we live is to mold a truly moral personality, it is here that **Jesus** comes to the rescue with the gift of faith both of an active **Spirit** and of a society complete in **Himself**.

Peter T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*²⁵⁹

It took **four deportations** to complete the exile of the Israelites (see Gt - [In the Thirty-Seventh Year of the Exile Jehoiachin was Released from Prison](#)). In 606 BC General **Nebuchadnezzar** conquered **Jerusalem** and took **the first deportation** of exiles (and some of the Temple vessels) back to **Babylon** (**Dani'el** 1:1-2). The **Babylonian king** took "hostages" to assure continued loyalty. One of the most important "hostages" taken was a godly young man named **Dani'el**.

After a three-month reign, **Jehoiachin** was taken into captivity with **the second deportation** of exiles to **Babylon** in 597 BC. Along with **Jehoiachin**, **Nebuchadnezzar** also deported **the queen mother, all the court officials and seven thousand fighting men, and a thousand craftsmen and artisans** - a total of **eighteen thousand**. Only the poorest people of the land were left (**2 Kings 24:14-16; 2 Chronicles 36:9-10**). Another one of those taken was **Ezeki'el** the prophet. Five years later **Ezekiel** began his prophetic ministry in **Babylon**. Most of the population was left behind under the puppet **King Zedekiah**. This letter was written three years after **Nebuchadnezzar** had placed **Zedekiah** as vassal king (see Dz - [Zedekiah Ruled For 11 Years from 598/597 to 586 BC](#)).

Exile is traumatic and terrifying. Our sense of who we are is very much determined by the place we are in and the people we are with. When that changes, violently and abruptly, who are we? The accustomed ways we have of finding our worth and sensing our significance vanishes. The first wave of emotion recedes and leaves us feeling worthless, meaningless. We don't fit anywhere. No one expects us to do anything. No one needs us. We are extra baggage. We aren't necessary.

How did these **Jews** in **exile** feel? How did **they** respond? If we imagine ourselves in a similar situation, remembering how we respond when we are forced to spend extended time with people we don't like in a place we don't like, we will not be far from the truth. It's as if they were saying, "A terrible thing has happened to us. And it's not fair! I know we weren't perfect, but we were no worse than the rest of them. And here we end up in this **Babylonian** desert while our friends are carrying on life as usual in **Jerusalem**. Why us? We can't understand the language; we don't like the food; the manners of **the Babylonians** are boorish; the schools are substandard; there are no decent places to worship; the temples are polluted with immorality and everyone speaks with an accent. **They** complained bitterly about the terrible circumstances in which **they** were forced to live. **They** longed, achingly, for **Zion**. In other words, **they** wallowed in self-pity.

They had **false prophets** with them who nurtured their feelings of unhappiness. We know the names of three of them: **Ahab son of Kolaiah, Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, and Sh'ma'yah the Nehelamite**. These **prophets** called attention to the supposed unfairness of their plight and stirred the pots of discontent. "Yes, the old religion of **Jerusalem** is what

we must get back to. Yes, it's worse luck that we are here when so many are enjoying the good life back in **Yerushalayim**. But hang on a little longer and we'll get back. It can't last much longer. How can it? Not one of us deserves such a life. Justice will prevail." These "prophets" described **their** supposed "dreams" that revealed that the exile would soon end.

Those three **false prophets** made a good living inciting envy and promoting nostalgia. But their messages and dreams, besides being false, were destructive. False dreams interfere with honest living. As long as the people thought they might be going home at any time, it made no sense to engage in committed, faithful work in **Babylon**. If there was a good chance that they would soon get back all they had lost, there was no need to develop a life of any significance where they were. Since their real relationships were back in **Yerushalayim**, they could be casual and irresponsible in their relationships in exile . . . they weren't going to see these people much longer anyway. Why bother planting gardens? Why learn the business practices of the culture? The false prophets manipulated the self-pity of the people into neurotic fantasies. **The people**, glad for a religious reason to be lazy, lived hand to mouth, parasites on society and indifferent to the reality of their actual lives.²⁶⁰

A letter from Yirmeyahu in Yerushalayim to the exiles in Babylon: This is the text of the letter the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from the City of David to Babylon **in the second deportation** of exiles (see Du - **Jehoiachin Ruled For 3 Months in 598 BC**). This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Tziyon, the craftsmen and the artisans had gone into exile from the City. He sent his message by diplomatic mail and entrusted the letter to Elisah son of Shaphan (26:24) and to **Gemariah son of Hilkiah** (who was the high priest under good King Josiah), **whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon (29:1-3)**. One day these two trustworthy men from **Jerusalem** appeared unannounced among the exiles. **They** had come on official business, carrying a message to **the king of Babylon**.

On **their** way to the palace **they** visited **the community** in exile. The air was charged with excitement. **Everyone** had questions: What was this one doing? What was that one doing? **Elisah** and **Gemariah** waved **them** silent. Before giving **them** the local news from **Tziyon** the two had a message from **Yirmeyahu**, **a letter to the exiles**:

This is what the LORD of heaven's angelic armies, the God of Isra'el says to all those **I** carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. "You are not camping. **Build houses and settle down (29:4-5a)**. Make yourself at home. If all you do is sit around a pine for the time you get back to **Jerusalem**, your present lives will be neglected and empty. Your life right now is every bit as valuable as it will be when you get back to **Yerushalayim**. **Babylon** is not your choice, but it's your judgment. Dwell there. **Plant**

gardens and eat what they produce (29:5b). Become a productive member of society. Don't expect others to do it for you. Get your hands into the **Babylonian** soil. Become knowledgeable about the **Babylonian** irrigation system. Acquire skill in cultivating fruits and vegetables in this soil and climate. Get some **Babylonian** recipes and cook them. Grow where you're planted.

Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease (29:6). Just as the Jews did not assimilate with the Egyptians in Egypt; they did not assimilate with the **Babylonians** in **Babylon**. To assimilate would be no more than to repeat the sins of **Jerusalem** in **Babylon**. No . . . this was not a command to intermarry with the **Babylonians**; on the contrary, it was to increase the **Jewish** population (**Exodus 1:9-10**).

All letters of the period began with a salutation that had some expression of **shalom**. "**Shalom** to you," or "**shalom** to you and your family." But this letter had no such salutation. **Verse 5** merely plunges into the body of the letter, giving the reader the sense that the writer is at best abrupt, and at worst rude. Where is the polite salutation, the greeting of **shalom**? First comes the instructions to **the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children, give your sons and daughters in marriage**, and settle down in **Babylon**. Then, in **verse 7**, comes the deferred word about **shalom**.

Seek the shalom of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to ADONAI for [Babylon] because if it prospers, you too will prosper (29:7 CJB). **Jeremiah's** letter was both a rebuke and a challenge. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourselves. Don't have the attitude of a prisoner of war. Prisoners "do time." They count the days until their release, days that are essentially empty. Don't listen to **the lying prophets** feed you false hopes. You are not there accidentally, victims of bad luck. I have sent you there deliberately and you will be in **Babylon** for a long time. Do not live your days moping around for **Tziyon**. Live your lives there, in **Babylon**, and live them fully. Do not put aside **the prayer** of **Psalm 122:6: Pray for shalom in Yerushalayim!** Learn a new prayer: **Pray for shalom in Babylon!** For in **Babylon's shalom** you will find your **shalom**.²⁶¹

Living in **exile** forces a decision: Will I focus my attention on what is wrong with the world and feel sorry for myself? Or will I focus my energies on how I can live at my best in this place I find myself? It's always easier to complain about problems than to live a life of dignity. Daily we face decisions on how we will respond to these exile conditions. We can say, "I don't like it. I want to be where I was ten years ago. How can you expect me to throw myself into what I don't like . . . that would be sheer hypocrisy. What sense is there in taking risks and tiring myself out among people I don't even like in a place where I have no future?"

Or we can say, "I will do my best with what is here. Far more important than the climate of this place, the economics of this place, the neighbors of this place, is the **God** of this place. **God** is here with me. What I am experiencing right now is on ground that was created by Him and with people whom **He** loves. It is just as possible to live out the will of **God** here as any place else. I am full of fear. I don't know my way around. I have much to learn. I'm not sure I can make it. Change is hard. Developing intimacy among strangers is always a risk. Building relationships in unfamiliar and hostile surroundings is difficult. But I can do it with **God's** help.²⁶²

Jeremiah had warned **Judah** against false prophets, now he will warn the exiles. **Yes, this is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el says: Do not let the false prophets and diviners among you deceive you (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Their dreams are made up from their own imagination. They are prophesying lies to you in My name. I have not sent them, declares the LORD (29:8-9).**

The divine plan for **Isra'el** is now stated. **This is what ADONAI says: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill My gracious promise to bring you back (shuwb) to this place (29:10).** It was probably from this letter that **Daniel** learned of the **seventy-year near historical prophecy**. In **Dani'el 9:1-2**, the prophet refers to the **seventy years** in that **the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years**. But he does not state that *the captivity* was supposed to last **seventy years**. That is an important distinction (see **Gt - Seventy Years of Babylonian Rule**).

But there was also a promise in **Jeremiah's** letter, which finally came to the center and shaped the exile experience: **For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (29:11).** **YHVH's** plans for **Isra'el** are fixed. His plans were for her welfare, not for her destruction, for the future she had hoped for. This will be discussed in more detail in **Chapters 30-33** (see **EI - The Book of Consolation**). This is one of the most misused scriptures in the Bible. There are three important things to remember when interpreting Scripture . . . context . . . context . . . context! This verse is constantly taken out of context, and the context is the nation of **Isra'el**.

Then, under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit (Second Timothy 3:16), Jeremiah gives a **far eschatological prophecy**, describing the national regeneration of **Isra'el** at the end of the *Great Tribulation* (see **Gk - The Valley of Dry Bones**). **You will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you (see my commentary on Revelation Ev - The Basis for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ).** **You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you (Deuteronomy 4:29), declares the LORD, and will bring you back (shuwb) from**

captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you, and will bring you back (**shuwb**) to the place from which I carried you into exile (29:12-14). This is in keeping with the **unconditional divine** Jewish Covenants (see **Af - The Covenants of the TaNaKh**)

Dani'el did correctly understand that **Israel's** national confession needed to precede her final restoration, but **he** could not anticipate the Church Age (see the commentary on **Hebrews - The Dispensation of Grace**) because it was a **mystery** to him (**Ephesians 5:32**). A mystery in the Bible is something that was once hidden - unknown by mankind (although known by **God**) - but now is revealed. In **Dani'el 9**, the prophet did not make this differentiation; as a result, **he** thought after **seventy years** the messianic Kingdom would begin. That is why an angel came to **Dani'el** and explained his error in thinking.

The people left in **Jerusalem** were saying that **God** had raised up prophets in **Babylon**. This was partially true because the **LORD** raised up **Dani'el** and **Ezeki'el** in **Babylon**. But they were not referring to those two godly men, they were referring to false prophets. You may say, "The **LORD** has raised up prophets for us in **Babylon** who prophesy a return in the immediate future," but this is what **ADONAI** says about King **Zedekiah** who sits on **David's** throne and all the people who remain in this city of **Jerusalem**, your fellow citizens who did not go into exile - yes, this is what the **LORD** of heaven's angelic armies says: I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them like figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. I will pursue them with the sword, famine and plague and will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth, a curse and an object of horror, of scorn and reproach, among all the nations where I will drive them. For they have not listened to My words, declares **ADONAI**, words that I **persistently** sent to them by My servant the prophets. And you exiles have not listened either," declares the **LORD**. Therefore, hear the word of the **LORD**, all you exiles whom I have sent away from **Yerushalayim** to **Babylon** (29:15-20). Without realizing it, the exiles were better off than those left in the **Land** because those living in **Jerusalem** would face certain death with **Zion's** destruction. Nevertheless, the exiles shouldn't make the same mistake those in the **City** were making by listening to false prophets who were feeding them lies.

Then **Jeremiah** sent a message to two of the false prophets. This is what **ADONAI-Tzva'ot**, the **God** of **Isra'el** says about **Ahab** and **Zedekiah**. They are prophesying lies to you in My name. Their sin was that of **Hañaniah**, prophesying lies in **God's** name of an early return from **Babylon**. They gave the exiles false hope . . . they were not settling down to stay. Therefore, their judgment would be death, like **Hañaniah**, before the eyes of the exiles. This was looked on as an act of rebellion against **Babylon**, so **Nebuchadnezzar** had them burned in the fire. We know that the king liked to kill people by fire because **he** tried to kill **Dani'el** and his three friends in the same way.

As a result, it became a proverb or colloquial saying that was created about them and became a common curse among the people. Because of them, all the exiles from Judah who are in Babylon will use this curse, "May the LORD treat you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon burned in the fire." For they have done outrageous things in Isra'el; they have committed adultery with their neighbors wives (they were not only false prophets, but they were immoral also), and in My name they have uttered lies - which I did not authorize. I know it (God is all-knowing) and am a witness to it, declares ADONAI (29:21-23). Saying, I am a witness was the standard term of the day meaning *I am cosigner*. God authorized, or *cosigned* this curse.

The false prophets were furious. After Jeremiah sent the letter to the exiles found in 29:4-14, Sh'ma'yah (another false prophet) didn't like what Jeremiah had to say. So in 29:25-29, Sh'ma'yah wrote his own letter and **sent a scathing, angry letter back to Zephaniah, the high priest**, in Zion (2 Kings 25:18-21; Jer 21:1, 37:3, 52:24-27).

Tell Sh'ma'yah the [dreamer], This is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el, says: You sent letters in your own name to all the people in the City of David, but more specifically, to the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, and to all the other priests. The content of Sh'ma'yah's letter read like this: The LORD has appointed you priest in place of Jehoiada (and in place of Pash'chur) to be in charge of the Temple (just as Pash'chur had been in charge of the Temple). Part of Zephaniah's duty was to keep the peace in the Temple (just as Pash'chur had wrongly tried to do with Jeremiah (see Da - **Jeremiah and Pash'chur**)). You should put any maniac who acts like a prophet into the stocks and neck-irons (29:24-26). So why have you not reprimanded Jeremiah from Anathoth, who poses as a prophet among you (29:27)? But Jeremiah did not pose as a prophet, he was appointed by ADONAI to be a prophet (see Aj - **The Call of Jeremiah**). Sh'ma'yah, however, was merely posing as a prophet. Jeremiah, the true prophet of God, had sent a message to the exiles in Babylon: You will be there a long time. Therefore, build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce (29:28).

Zephaniah the priest, however fearing Ha'Shem, read the letter to Jeremiah the prophet. Then the inspired word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, "Send this message to all the exiles, 'This is Sh'ma'yah's sin: Because Sh'ma'yah has prophesied to you, even though I did not send him, and has persuaded you to trust in lies (that the exiles would soon return to Jerusalem), Sh'ma'yah was then under judgment. YHVH said: I will surely punish Sh'ma'yah the dreamer and his descendants. They will all die in captivity. He will have no one left among this people, nor will he see the good things I will do for My people because he has preached rebellion against Me' (29:29-32)." False prophecy always ferments rebellion against ADONAI because it says things that the LORD doesn't say.

But **others**, maybe most, accepted the message from **Yirmeyahu**. Shaken out of **their** routine by **exile**, **they** settled down to find out what it meant to be **God's people** in the place **they** didn't want to be - in **Babylon**. The result was that it became the most creative period in Jewish history. **They** didn't lose **their** identity . . . **they** discovered it. **They** learned how to pray in deeper and more life-changing ways than ever. **They** wrote and copied and pondered the TaNaKh that had come down from Moshe and the prophets. **They** found that **ADONAI** wasn't dependent on a place . . . that **He** was not tied to familiar surroundings. The violent dislocation of **the exile** shook **them** out of **their** false assumptions and allowed **them** to see depths and heights that **they** had never imagined before. **They** lost everything that **they** thought was important and found what was the most important: **they** found **YHVH**.

It keeps on happening. **Exile** is the worst that reveals the best. Normal life is full of distractions and things that are unnecessary. Then catastrophe: Dislocation. Exile. Illness. Accident. Job loss. Divorce. Death. The reality of our lives is rearranged without anyone consulting us or waiting for our permission. We are no longer at home.

All of us are given moments, days, months, years or exile. What will we do with them? Wish we were somewhere else? Complain? Blame others? Escape to fantasies? Drug ourselves into oblivion? Or build and plant and marry and seek the shalom of the place we live and the people we are with? **Exile** reveals what really matters and frees us to pursue what really matters, which is to **love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).**²⁶³