

# The Language of Exile: Ministerial Formation in the Post-Christian Context

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## INTRODUCTION

Anyone involved in theological education for any length of time in recent years has probably heard or even said something like, “We need to be preparing students for the church of today not the church of twenty-five years ago.” Such a statement is often a veiled, or perhaps not so veiled, critique of seminary education as being out of touch at best and irrelevant at worst. It suggests that the kind of formation for ministry that seminaries sometimes offer has not changed with the times and adapted to the new realities that the church is facing. While such criticisms may not always be welcome, an honest assessment will admit that there is, at minimum, a kernel of truth in them. Sometimes seminaries get stuck in their ways and fail to respond to the changing needs of the church and society. This is particularly true today as Western culture is in a time of monumental and rapid change. In most places in North America and Europe, the place of the church has shifted drastically. In general terms this shift has meant a move from somewhere near or at the center of cultural influence to a place much closer to the margins.

This ongoing, evolving change means that Christian ministry faces new challenges in its current context. This impacts how ministers need to be formed and, thus, how field education programs and the work of ministry supervision must adapt in ways that help prepare students for ministry today and the future, not for the way ministry may have been done in decades past.

It may be useful to recognize that this is not the first time that the people of God have faced a drastic shift in their cultural reality. For ancient Israel, the Babylonian exile was a harrowing move from a place of autonomy and cultural power to a place of marginalization and relative powerlessness. Their experience can inform our own and offer us tangible ways to respond to the changing place of the church in Western culture as a whole and also to the specific work of developing and supervising ministers for the church of the twenty-first century. This article briefly presents an overview of the exilic experience of Israel as presented in the Old Testament, draws out some parallels between their experience and the church’s experience in today’s context, and then,

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drawing from the prayer language of the exile as found in the book of Lamentations and select psalms that are generally thought to belong to the exilic period, provides some insight into how a number of key concepts from this prayer language can be utilized in cultivating ministers for the church today. Perhaps the wisdom of an ancient people, speaking from the margins, can inform the journey of the church in the West today.

## EXILE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL<sup>2</sup>

The history of ancient Israel is turbulent. The northern kingdom, Israel, went into exile under the Assyrians first in 734 BCE, with a second deportation in 722 BCE. The southern kingdom, Judah, went into captivity almost a century and a half later at the hands of the Babylonians. The invasion was the culmination of an ongoing Babylonian threat against Jerusalem which began in 605 and culminated in 581, with a major invasion and deportation taking place in 587. In the course of these three invasions, evidence indicates that all or virtually all of the towns in the heartland of Judah incurred serious damage.<sup>3</sup> This included the city of Jerusalem, which was destroyed, including the temple, in the second invasion.<sup>4</sup>

While archaeological evidence is inconclusive, and thus the exact history of the exilic period remains to a large degree uncertain, it is hard to believe that any experience of displacement that includes subjugation by a long-time oppressor and displacement from one's homeland can be understood as anything other than tremendously difficult. For the people of Judah, these events must have had devastating consequences. Their experience of exile was one of horrific displacement, powerlessness, and painful memory. At least three major symbols were taken from Israel upon the demise of the nation at the hands of the Babylonians: land, king, and temple. Perhaps these three things more than anything else were signs of God's presence and unique relationship with Israel as God's people. The land was God's

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## <sup>2</sup>NOTES

This section of the article draws significantly from my book *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope after Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of surrounding villages in Judah, see Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 36–97. <sup>4</sup> The result of these actions is debated. This stems from the paucity of information available from this period of ancient Israelite history. Some scholars have cast doubt on the historicity of the exile. For a concise review of the scholarly debate around the extent of the exile, see Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1999), 39–50; Hans Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and*

*Archaeology of Judah during the "Exile" Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996); and Lester Grabbe, *Leading Captivity Captive: The Exile as History and Ideology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). All of these authors doubt the historical accuracy of the biblical account of the exile. For more sympathetic responses to the exile, see Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); and Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003).

promise to them as part of their exodus from Egypt. It was a symbol of God's faithfulness, and it allowed the Israelites to establish themselves as a people in a specific place of their own. The Davidic kingship was another sign of the covenant between God and God's people as it symbolized God's leadership among the covenant people. The Jerusalem temple was the place where Israel believed God's presence was particularly immediate. The temple was the center of religious ritual and a reminder that Yahweh was reigning with and over God's covenant people.

With the exile, all three of these symbols were now gone. No more land meant no more place to call their own, no more king meant no more political autonomy, no more temple meant no more place to gather to participate in the unique rituals of Yahweh worship. Most poignantly, it meant that the things that God had given the Israelites as signs of God's covenant were now gone. Did this mean that the covenant was over? Were they no longer God's chosen people? Had Yahweh abandoned them? In the ancient context, these were the questions that exile presented.

The religious nature of Israel drove the people to seek a theological understanding of their captivity. The canonical materials contain hopeful streams of thinking that call Israel to reformulation. The many voices of biblical exilic literature offer not only a diagnosis of the people's situation but a prescription for reformulation that can help inform our own exilic situation as the church in post-Christian society. Identifying this aspect of the Hebrew Bible's witness, Walter Brueggemann states, Exile did not lead Jews in the Old Testament to abandon faith or to settle for abdicating despair, nor to retreat to privatistic religion. On the contrary, exile evoked the most brilliant literature and the most daring theological articulation in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> What is clear is that the exilic period demonstrates the disorientation that new social realities bring and how theological reflection on the nature of God as revealed through the sacred text and human experience can produce the wisdom to respond effectively to these new realities.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 3.

CONTEXTS<sup>3</sup>

Historically, the people who follow the God of the Bible are a marginalized people. Although Christendom may have defined Western culture for approximately 1,500 years, it is the exception, not the rule. The people of Israel were never a superpower; they were a small nation among a world of much larger and more powerful nations. The Babylonian exile in 587 BCE followed by ongoing Persian captivity only made this experience more intense. The early church was a fledgling group that lived insecurely on the fringes of the Roman Empire. The church in many countries lives as a small minority, sometimes even persecuted because of their Christian faith. As already noted, in the contemporary Western world where Christianity once dominated, the church finds itself increasingly relegated to the margins of society, where it is deemed irrelevant and a relic of a former time.

While exceptions to this narrative can be identified, they are just that—exceptions. One of the questions the church must always answer in any context, but especially in a marginalized one, is how do we sustain ourselves as Christian communities and continue to form congregations for ongoing participation in the mission of God in the world?

While there is more than one answer to this question, the story of ancient Israel in exile can offer some clear guidance. A unique resource from the exilic literature of the Bible offers direction to congregations who are struggling to remain faithful to their calling to be God's people in the midst of challenging circumstances. This literature also provides insight into some key perspectives that ministering people need to have today and that mentors need to help inculcate in their students as they participate in their formation for ministry. This resource is the prayer language of exile found in the book of Lamentations and the book of Psalms that can be placed during the period of the Babylonian exile with reasonable certainty (Psalms 44, 74, 79, 89, 102, 106, and 137).<sup>4</sup>

Four key themes emerge from this biblical literature of exile that were significant in sustaining the ancient people of Israel throughout their exile in Babylonia and subsequent captivity by Persia. In today's post-Christendom church, these prayer themes can shape local churches in marginalized contexts to function faithfully as a distinct people of God. As such, they need attention in the development of those

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<sup>3</sup> Parts of this section are taken from my article "A Spirituality of Exile," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 10, no. 1 (2017): 33–50.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the Exile* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 36. Middlemas notes that although the exilic context of Psalm 44 is debatable, it is often listed along with the other exilic psalms. Psalm 137 should not necessarily be dated as from the exilic period, but is a clear reflection on life during that period.

engaged in, or who have a desire to engage in, Christian ministry in the current Western context.

The four themes that emerge from the prayer language under consideration here are lament, reorientation, memory, and hope. These themes have practical implications for ministry today and can both sustain and shape the lives of congregations and ministers for life on the margins just as they did the lives of ancient Israelites so many years ago.

#### LAMENT: DEFINING REALITY

understand, what the realities of their circumstances are. You cannot make the right decisions or move forward effectively without a clear knowledge of where things truly stand both inside and outside of your organization. This is important wisdom for the church in any age, but it is particularly germane today. Those involved in church leadership, or aspiring to be involved in church leadership, must have a clear and sober sense of the changing reality that they are ministering in. This needs careful definition, and the language of lament can help with that.

In many sectors of the church the idea of lament is obscure and rarely implemented. For some of us the term may seem quite archaic or removed from us as it speaks in a language that we do not regularly employ in our day-to-day lives. Lament often comes when emotions are raw and we have no other words except ones that express anger and disappointment. Generally, in Western culture at least, this kind of display of unvarnished emotion is not encouraged in public. Restraint and a veneer of strength is usually considered more appropriate. Lament can be seen as negative or pessimistic, and we often tend to value leaders who are positive and optimistic to keep everyone buoyed up and hopeful. Also, lament will often veer into the realm of questioning God. It often asks “Why?” and/or “Where are you?” This kind of questioning is sometimes discouraged or seen as a lack of faith and trust. Thus, lament is not a type of speech that is usually employed outside of its use in formal Christian liturgy.

However, lament is honest language; it is a first-response language. It is the language that gives an initial voice to the unwanted circumstances that we sometimes find ourselves in. To borrow from DePree, it is reality-defining language. It names things as they are, or at least as we perceive them to be. If defining reality is an important act of leadership, then lament is a useful tool for a church that is finding itself becoming less important in the life of its community, less well attended, and more confused about how to do ministry in an increasingly secular context.

For those from ancient Judah who were cast out of their land, lament played a defining role in their response. Their initial reaction to exile can be found in the various psalms and laments that depict the prayer language of the period. In words of anger,

frustration, and disbelief, the poets of Israel express their sense of God's absence. The theological crisis with which these texts wrestle and to which they give voice is the perception that God's care for them as a people has been called into question by the exile.

While prayers of lament are multi-faceted and include positive elements of both trust and hope, the theological reflection that is at the heart of biblical lament usually begins by naming the situation as it truly is, as Brueggemann writes:

The first task among exiles is to represent the catastrophe, to state what is happening by way of loss in vivid images so that the loss can be named by its right name and so that it can be publicly faced in the depths of its negativity.<sup>5</sup>

While lament in the exilic literature in the Old Testament is a response to a particular experience much different from our own as North American and Western European Christians, the correlation is found in the determination to express things honestly and name the situation as it truly is. Thus, when the author of Lamentations writes, "Why have you forsaken us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?" (5:20),<sup>6</sup> the writer is capturing a basic question that we may feel as we negotiate our way through a time of loss and new challenges that make us wonder where God is in all of this. Why has God allowed God's church to suffer such decline and where is God's intervening power in a time when things that once seemed so certain no longer seem to be holding together?

In Psalm 79 the writer calls attention to the fact that God's absence is obvious even to God's enemies, "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'" (v. 10). This is a question the church faces in a secular age in which science and logic are trusted to provide all the answers and faith is expected by many to be kept private and out of the public discourse.

In times such as this, the kind of honest speech provided by the language of lament is crucial to the cause of the church and ministry formation because it is a tool that helps us to define our reality. This is not to say that ministry leaders should be all gloom and doom, but the ability to lament constructively is a skill ministers need today.

## LAMENT AND SUPERVISION

So, what does the ability to lament constructively look like in the practice of supervision? First, it is understanding that lament is more than a form of prayer. As already noted, it is honest speech, and it can be expressed in a multiplicity of ways. Christian leaders and ministry formation supervisors must be equipped to present a

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NRSV translation.

reality-defining perspective to those they are mentoring. This is more than just being honest about the challenges of the work of ministry; that is a given. It is about also being able to present and reflect on the larger contours of the church in culture today. What is the future of religion, the church, pastoral ministry, chaplaincy, or any other form of ministry in your context? How might that affect how you help train your students for these realities? Entering conversations about these things may seem like lament because they are not necessarily going to seem positive on the surface, although part of the work of good supervision is to help students define reality without slipping into despair. We can only prepare ministry candidates for the church of today or tomorrow by helping them understand their times and giving them some direction on what to do in light of that understanding. This means being clear about the larger cultural challenges that affect ministry today and what that means to the practice of ministry in their context. Often, in working with students, we may find that they can even educate us on some of these things. Their life experience, current educational experience, and cultural situatedness, which may be different from ours, can lead to their giving us insights into the cultural reality we are in that can enhance our own understanding and effectiveness. This is the potential of supervision when it is practiced in an optimal way.

Helping those we supervise to learn the practice of lament in a way that equips them to help others to name and own the challenges that the church faces today is a needed skill in a time of immense change and in many places of decline and decay. Lament was the first response to exile for ancient Israel. This response reflects an unwillingness to politely drift along in quiet acceptance; it is both a somber and a hopeful act. This initial reaction to exile demonstrated that while the people of Israel may have felt abandoned, they were determined to survive. The work of defining reality can similarly be an act of resistance and movement toward more effective engagement in the current context.

#### REORIENTATION: ADDRESSING OUR SITUATION

The biblical literature of exile, steeped in the language of lament as it is, includes the transitional language that moved the people from the raw response of lament to an acceptance of their fate and, more importantly, the role they played in bringing it about. For Israel an exilic spirituality included gaining a perspective on the reality of their situation by considering the relational dynamic that lay at the root of their plight. Their failure as covenant partners with YHWH was part of their dilemma, and it was also the foundation of rediscovering God in the midst of exile. In lamenting their affliction, Israel also affirmed their desire to look forward and reach out for new life. Their memory of God's past work laid a foundation for this. However, they would only be able to truly move toward a fresh experience of God and regain genuine hope in God if

they sincerely came to terms with their circumstances. This entailed recognizing their part in the situation.

In the church today there is a deep need for a reorientation that causes us to acknowledge our historic failures and act in ways that help to bring about reconciliation and repair. In my home country of Canada, the church has been culpable in the building and running of residential schools where Indigenous children were sent to be educated and formed in the ways of their European colonizers. Often these children were forcibly removed from their homes, and many faced physical, sexual, and verbal abuse in the schools they were brought to. Hundreds of them died and were buried in unmarked graves. The church in Canada needs to be reoriented so that it acknowledges its sins and can enter into the work of reconciliation with the Indigenous people. In the United States, it may be that reorientation is needed in the way the church has been involved in the oppression of African Americans and other racial minorities. In churches everywhere, the treatment of LGBTQ+ people has historically been abysmal. Part of the reason why the church finds itself in a time of being moved to the margins in many places is because of the way it has failed to behave according to its baptismal identity. We need to be reoriented to this reality.

For ancient Israel, this transition is important as it begins to reassert Israel's sense of partnership with YHWH that is rooted in their covenantal relationship. The book of Lamentations is the key to this transition. The opening poem begins to let confession flow:

The Lord is right,  
For I have rebelled against his word. (1:18)

See O Lord, how distressed I am;  
My stomach churns,  
My heart is wrung within me,  
Because I am very rebellious. (1:20)

While couched in the discourse of lament, a sense of ownership is emerging. God's ways are just, and Israel's part in the dilemma must be acknowledged. In the context of Israel's Babylonian exile there is a deep cultural assumption that sin triggers divine anger and punishment. However, this idea was matched in antiquity by an equally strong assumption that repentance should bring about divine compassion and forgiveness.<sup>7</sup> This theological understanding is foundational not only to the way the prayer life of Israel was shaped but also to how the Israelites understood themselves as a people in relationship with God.

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<sup>7</sup> F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2002), 123.



Glenn Pemberton, a professor of Old Testament who has himself experienced significant physical suffering, has written eloquently on lament and moving beyond lament.<sup>8</sup> The reality is that lament, if we are honest, produces changes in us and in our relationship with the Lord. It reorients us to ourselves, to the world, and to God. As this reorientation happens, it is possible for us to begin to see a stream of light shine through the darkness of our present circumstances and for hope to begin to emerge. Out of lament comes the possibility of new things. Pemberton reflects on this from his own experience when he writes, “If we are people of faith and the crisis was serious, then the end of the crisis is not the end of the story. It cannot be.”<sup>9</sup>

The ability to help the church reorient itself is a necessary skill in ministry today and one that supervisors need to help students develop. This entails honestly discussing, on a macro level, the shortcomings of the church historically as well as the specific failures of the church on a micro level in the context in which we find ourselves. Further, it invites us to explore what the implications these past mistakes have on ministry today. Some of the answers to that question will be discouraging, but they can also lead to reflection on potential constructive responses that can inform ministry practice as we move forward. This can help to develop a creative imagination in students aspiring to ministry and equip them to lead the church in a direction that demonstrates that it is learning from the failures of the past so it can participate in a preferred future that will benefit the people and communities that it has been created to serve. Helping students learn to value and embrace the concept of reorientation and consider practical ways of engaging in works that reflect a reoriented perspective is crucial to the work of ministry formation today.

#### MEMORY: GOING BACK TO GO FORWARD

The Hebrew word *zakar* is an important word in Old Testament theology.<sup>10</sup> It is the word for remembering, usually associated with the call on the people of Israel to remember God’s activity in the past as a foundation for faith that God will work similarly in current circumstances and future endeavours.

The writer of Psalm 44 equated God’s inaction on Israel’s behalf as God falling asleep on them. What is viewed as most egregious about this is the fact that this is not how God has acted in the past. We have heard it with our ears, O God;

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<sup>8</sup> Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), 25. See also Pemberton's book *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Pemberton, *After Lament*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough study of the concept of *zakar* in Old Testament theology and literature, see Brevard Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London: SCM, 1962).

our ancestors have told us  
 what you did in their days, in  
 days long ago.  
 With your hand you drove out the nations  
 and planted our ancestors;  
 you crushed the peoples and  
 made our ancestors flourish.  
 It was not by their sword that they won the land,  
 nor did their arm bring them victory; it was  
 your right hand, your arm,  
 and the light of your face, for you loved them. (vv. 1–3)

Later in the psalm, the psalmist reflects their knowledge that God is able to behave differently than God is currently doing. This forms a dialectic within the psalm that provides a tension between the interplay of lament and hope that compete for primacy in the prayer. It is the psalmist's memory of God's past behaviour that makes understanding the present circumstances difficult, but this memory also makes room for future hope of deliverance.

In the language of exilic prayer, sometimes the act of remembering comes in the form of recalling the promises and character of God as an encouragement to the people that God can act and thus that God can still be trusted. At other times, it is a reminder to God that the people still expect God to act in accord with God's character as it has been revealed and experienced in the past.

Says Brueggemann, "Israel knows that the God who has promised *hesed* [loving kindness] is committed to it and must be held to it, held insistently and uncompromisingly."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the move to remembering is rooted in the reciprocal relationship between God and God's people. The people must recall God's activity on their behalf in the past as an inspiration to faithfulness in the present, and God must be held to God's promise of steadfast love in the past as an impetus to action in God's people's current circumstances.

This spiritual discipline of remembering (*zakar*) was central to the Israelites as they processed the reality of exile. Similarly, it is central to the church's response to the cultural challenges it faces today. We continue forward by referencing the past and our recollection of the way that God has met us, sustained us, provided for us, and worked for us in the past. Helping people both individually and in congregational settings to access their memories of God's presence and faithfulness in the past is a key ministry

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 62.

aptitude for today. In giving supervision to students, we can help them develop this skill by inviting them to share stories of times they have experienced God's working in their lives, seen God's provision, sensed God's presence, or experienced God's power. We can share our stories of similar events. It is often through story that memories are accessed, and while it may seem like a simple thing, inviting people to share their stories and helping them to reflect theologically on them is both a gift and an art. It is a gift given to a person or congregation when they are invited to recall experiences that are meaningful and personal. It is an art to learn how to draw out rich theological reflection on these experiences, and this is where supervision can both model and teach students how to do this so that they can become adept at helping the people they are serving in their ministry context access their memories of God's work and have their faith in God's current and future working refreshed. A good supervisory practice can be to use a written narrative for this kind of reflection. The art of theological reflection can often be enhanced with a written document, and helping those we are mentoring to engage in the process of accessing their memory of God's work in their lives can be enhanced by inviting a written memoir of a significant experience that shaped their faith in a sustaining way.<sup>12</sup>

#### HOPE: LEADING THE CHURCH FORWARD TODAY

One goal of ministry in exilic times is to engender hope. This is not a feeling of optimism or an assurance that things will get better but rather a generative hope that both sustains faith and inspires new initiatives that allow faith to be expressed in ways that facilitate the ongoing mission of God in the midst of exile. In many ways, exilic hope is cultivated as we embrace our exile as an opportunity for renewal. The changed cultural situation in which the church finds itself is an opportunity for translating the faith in new, inventive ways. The prayer language of exile ultimately begins to sketch out a landscape of hope. It is a hard-won hope and a hope that may not come quickly, but it becomes the formative response of Israel to its ongoing exile.

In the exilic psalms and the book of Lamentations, the spiritual life of the exiles is marked by their steadfast refusal to abandon their God despite their sense of abandonment by God. Hope is never far from the surface of exilic prayer. The prayer language of the ancient Israelites evidences a refusal to give in to their circumstances. Through prayer there is an expression of a clear "counter-reality," a way of seeing that counters the lived experience.<sup>13</sup> This counter-reality offers the possibility that God's

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<sup>12</sup> Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 107.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis:

grace will allow for and bring about the restoration of God's presence and blessing. Within the struggle to understand the Israelites' current circumstances is the belief that God can restore. "Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself O Lord, that we may be restored" (Lamentations 5:20–21).

Paradoxically, YHWH's passive enablement of exile is part of God's presence with the community of faith. God's abandonment still contains within it God's cosmic presence. Even if God is not near in immediate experience, God is always in the background, and God's presence is experienced through God's decision to abandon.<sup>14</sup> Thus, even if God has chosen to abandon, God can still choose to return. God's removal of God's presence for a time is not ultimate. The covenant relationship does not mean that God may not remove Godself for a time, but it ensures that God will not abandon utterly. This understanding of the covenant relationship forms the foundation for hope in exilic prayer.

Thus, the spirituality of exile is ultimately hope-filled because even when God is absent God is never fully absent and—should God so choose—God can move in restorative power. The writer of Psalm 44, in accusing God of slumbering, hiding God's face, and forgetting God's afflicted people also calls for God to "rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love" (v. 26).

God's absence is not so total and final that prayer for deliverance is out of the question. Although events can lead to questioning God, they can also lead to a turning to God. This is the essential spirituality of the exilic community: experiencing hope in the midst of God's mysterious working in their communal life.

In a post-Christian context, it is easy to lose hope. It is easy to start believing that the Christian gospel has lost all traction and that the decline, and perhaps even end, of the church is inevitable. The counter-narrative to this is one that intrinsically seeks to instill a genuine sense of hope that God is at work and that God's church will continue to live and even thrive in these post-Christendom days. Those supervising ministry students have to help their students see themselves as "agents of hope."<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that the students need to be optimistic people with a positive outlook on things, although that can have its place; it has to run much deeper than that. It means helping students aspiring to vocational ministry to nurture and inspire hopefulness that is

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Fortress, 1997), 76.

<sup>14</sup> For brief discussions on the concept of presence in absence, see Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 321–24; and Brueggemann, *Deep Memory*, 82–83. For further study, see Joel Burnett, *Where Is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> This idea is taken from Donald Capps, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

authentic and contagious. This is dependent upon supervisors helping students to identify and cultivate sources of hope. What is genuine Christian hope? Where does it come from theologically and practically? It also means that we help students to nurture an identity of being an agent of hope, that is, of becoming people who, like the praying poets of ancient Israel, have the capacity to shepherd people into an understanding of the God who is present and at work in both their individual lives and the world at large. Exile may be destabilizing, but it is not the end of the story. Stewarding this narrative is the work of Christian ministry in a post-Christian culture, and those charged with the responsibility of supervising and mentoring student ministers need to help them grow into that identity.

## CONCLUSION

The ultimate function of Christian ministry is to bring about hope. Lament is the language that gives authenticity to our experience of God in this world and allows room for honest speech, which is foundational to any healthy relationship. This can further offer the possibility of reorientation. As we engage honestly with God, we may find that we begin to view God, ourselves, and/or God's working in this world through a new lens. Perhaps it will be a lens that accommodates new growth and a new depth of relationship between us and God. This will be enhanced by accessing our memories of God's past work in the history of the church and our own lived experience. This provides the foundation for a hope-producing language because as we enter into honest dialogue with God, this lens helps us see and respond to our current context. Further, our memory of God's work in the past is ignited and we are emboldened to have faith to trust in similar blessings in the future. Not only this, but it inspires us to begin asking God for these blessings by appealing directly to God's promises as they are rooted in God's character and then to work for them as God's church in the world today. For ministry supervisors who have the opportunity to mentor future leaders in the church, the language of exile is an indispensable tool. As we shape our supervision around the concepts of lament (defining reality), re-orientation (owning our own responsibility for the way things are), memory (remembering how God has worked in the past), and hope (that God will continue to work in our own current contexts), we can contribute to the preparation for ministry of leaders who are fit for the church of today and tomorrow, not for the church of twenty-five years ago that no longer exists.