

Jeremiah 29:4-7 and Immigrant Ministry

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the debate of immigration policy and the call for immigrant reform appear like clockwork during this presidential election year of 2008. Throw in the legal status of the immigrants, and it is not surprised to see so multiple options before offered on the topic. This article attempts to discover the contemporary significance of the passage Jeremiah 29:4-7, in particular, verses 4-7, in relation to immigrant ministry.

THE TEXT - Jeremiah 29:4-7

In the Bible, the Torah speaks explicitly on immigrants, or aliens. Israelites were not to mistreat an alien, for the Israelites themselves were aliens in Egypt (Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19). This command to have concern for the aliens is similar to the command to care for the fatherless and the widows (Exod. 21:21f; Deut. 14:28f). Also, obedience to the Law is not limited to the Israelites; it extends to the foreigners as well (Lev. 18:26; Deut. 31:12). While these passages instruct the host country to deal fairly to the aliens, Jeremiah 29, a classic passage on the theology of the city, considers life from the side of the guests.

THE CONTEXT

The third and final Judean exile occurred in 598 B.C. (2 Ki. 24:10-17). Royalties, officers, soldiers, craftsmen and artisans were taken by Nebuchadnezzar from Jerusalem to Babylon. In Jeremiah 29, the prophet addressed all the exiled elders, priests, prophets and people. Nine times within the letter, he uses direct quotation: "thus says the LORD." Five of those times, Jeremiah writes "the LORD of hosts" (Heb. *YHWH tzva'ot*, "Yahweh of armies"). This

military title appears mostly in the prophetic books (never in the Torah), and was a Jeremiah favorite (appearing 69 times). The title emphasizes God's mighty leadership and sovereignty. The God of Israel is the Commander-in-chief, even in the midst of exile, trouble, weakness and uncertainty.

⁴ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, ⁵ 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce. ⁶ 'Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. ⁷ 'And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.' " (Jer. 29:4-7, NASB)

A stern warning was given. God commanded the exiled not to listen to the "prophets and diviners" in their midst, or to their "dreams." Apparently some of them were in such desperation that they consulted seers who predicted there would be a swift return to Judah (29:8-9).

Rather, the LORD predicted 70 year of captivity and promised a return to the land of Israel (29:10; cf 25:11, Deut. 30:1-5).

THE COMMANDS

"Exile" does not necessarily mean imprisonment, or enslavement, but displacement and resettlement in foreign lands. The Judean exiles settled in Tel-abib on the Chebar River (Ezk. 1:1; 3:15), and in Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan and Immer (Ezr. 2:59; Neh. 7:61). If they were faithful in their new situation, God would cause them to prosper with many children and fertile crops. They were to seek and pray for the welfare of Babylon and the other towns to

which they were deported, so that they could live in peace as beneficiaries of God's sovereignty over the nations.

1. To Be God's Agents

Mentioned here twice was the fact that the exiles were not victims but agents of God. They were sent by the Lord from Jerusalem to Babylon.

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⁷ 'And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.' "

The KJV translates correctly the *hiphil* stem as "whom I have caused to be carried away" (similar in v.7). Emphatically God is the subject who leads Israel into captivity.

No doubt about it, the nation was punished by God into exile. At the same time, they were also like missionaries sent to the enemy's territory in God's sovereign will.

2. To Live Normally

"Normal life" was expected in the foreign land—to build, to plant, and to raise families (vv.5-6).

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⁶ 'Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.

The exiled were to prepare for a long stay. Seventy years—calculated from the first princely exile such as Daniel and his friends in 606 B.C.—is an extended period of time. Biblically, a generation typically lasts only 40 years.

Though return and restoration would eventually come, in the meantime, as immigrants to the land, they would conduct their normal day-to-day activities. They were commanded to settle down, build houses, secure a job, plant garden, enjoy work of the hands, and to raise families. Note that their children were expected to continue to dwell in that land, to marry and have their own children.

The command to increase and to multiply is analogous to the Edenic command given to Adam (Gen. 1:22), and was later restated to Noah (9:1). The exiles were in no way refugees, but residents in another land, continuing to live under the sovereignty of the Creator God.

3. To Seek the Welfare of the City

⁷ 'And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.' "

The exiled were to seek the welfare (Heb. *shalom*, NIV: "peace and prosperity") of the city. The Lord ordered them to pray to Him, suggesting that He would answer their prayers. Peace and prosperity granted by God to their host city would improve the well-being of these new residents. This command might have been the most difficult for the exiles.

Seven hundred miles away from their home, the exiles would suffer from emotional distress (cf Psa. 137). They faced separation of families—some might have been in Judah, while some might have died during the journey to Babylon. There were changes in landscape. They settled in flat, alluvial plains surround by rivers and canals instead of hills and forests like in their homeland. Walled cities and tall temple towers for foreign gods decorated the land. Language became a barrier. They had to become accustomed to the extensive use of the Aramaic language to communicate with their neighbors and conduct business.

The readers of Jeremiah, as unwilling guests in a hostile country, could have very possibly experienced humiliation, despair, guilt, doubt, anger and the like. Seeking the welfare of the city is contrary to one's natural preference.

Yet this command is similar to that given by Paul in the New Testament. He instructed prayer for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1-2). At the time of his writing, Nero was the emperor. Such intercession would have brought peace and godliness, and it was beneficial for evangelism (vv.3-4).

THE CONTEMPORARY

The global migration in the modern world is phenomenal. This passage speaks volume on immigrants coming to settle in a new country and a new city.

If the Lord gave these commands in Jeremiah 29 to the exiled who were involuntarily transported, how much more would he command the modern immigrants who freely, if not eagerly, relocated at their own free will?

The term "immigrant" is used loosely to refer to one who settles indefinitely in a new setting, often with a different language, ethnicity, culture and form of government. Immigrant includes refugees and those entering the country illegally; however, it excludes the shorter-termers: international students, itinerary tourists, traveling businessmen and contract workers. I believe that the commands discussed above may be transferred and applied to a contemporary setting. As in all Biblical commands, they are proper not only for Christians, but also for non-Christians who may not realize the responsibility nor have the ability to obey them (cf. Rom. 2:12-15).

1. Eliminate Victim Mentality

People were led, knowingly and unknowingly, by the Lord to leave their home country and go to a new country. As the exiles were sent as God's missionaries, immigrants migrate under the sovereign hand of God.

Officially, some immigrants may be classified as refugees, permanent residents or transitional citizens. Some may arrive rather reluctantly, with few options open and many limitations. To make matters worse, discrimination in various forms still exists in the new land, especially to newcomers. They are treated as second-class citizens.

Nevertheless, immigrants have to shed off the mentality and image of being victimized. One's self-identity determines one's outlook, behavior and lifestyle. It has a significant impact on the future of oneself as well as one's family members and offspring.

Having a victim's mentality delays or even prevents successful assimilation to the country. Even if one is disciplined by God, the immigrant needs to be reminded of God's continuing goodness and loyal love in the new land. The God of second chances is still in full control of the life and destiny of the immigrant.

2. Avoid Nostalgia

Nostalgia and romanticizing are normal for immigrants, especially in the midst of the challenges in accommodating their lives in the new culture. The homeland seems much more desirable from afar, both spatially and in regards to time. Such homesickness, however, hurts one from moving forward in the new land.

It is true that with advancements in technology, connections with the former country are readily available and affordable. Mobile phone, satellite TV, the Internet and a plethora of ethnic media makes communication rather simple. However, a growing attachment to the news,

entertainment and sports of the former country, causes one's attention to be directed away from this new home.

The command from the Lord is to live a "normal life" in the new city. An immigrant would not contribute much beyond her immediate survival and surrounding if her intentions are to stay like a visitor, continually yearning to go back to her home country.

3. Integrate & Immerse

The final command is to beseech the welfare for the host city.

Integration and immersion describe the last step of assimilation into the new country. These begin as the immigrant holds the proper self-identity, looks beyond her immediate family and starts becoming involved in her own community and eventually to the larger community of the city.

Integration activities include participation in schools, community events, establishing businesses, dialogue and debate on public policies and involvement in political forum and government. In short, live like a native.

The immigrant evolves slowly from being a cautious newcomer, a disinterested observer, an inexperienced learner and a hesitant resident, to an energetic participant, an avid student and a concerned citizen. She transforms from a consumer into a contributor, benefiting the peace and prosperity of the city.

We have to realize that it is a long process. Complete assimilation may not occur until the second or subsequent generations.

THE CONNOTATION

What are the connotations for the local church in order to meet the needs of immigrants?

1. Assist the integration.

Both the native or indigenous church and the immigrant church in the host city can offer help. An immigrant church is the church that is comprised of Christians who are mainly immigrants, having the same origin or background as the new immigrants.

A myriad of services are offered to help the immigrants: to find housing, schools and employment, get around using public transportation, shop and conduct essential business. They offer services including language class, filling out forms, deciphering legal and official correspondences, tutoring to the children of the immigrants, citizenship class, job training and computer literacy training.

Some churches seek to balance the Biblical mandate to care for both the physical and spiritual needs of the person, and offer a mix of health clinics, Bible studies, family and youth services and evangelistic events.

2. Model the integration.

The immigrant church in particular is in a good position to serve the immigrants for most of the members have been through a similar experience and can empathize with problems and concerns. Yet the church needs to go beyond assisting the immigrants and demonstrate the integration in their own lives.

Jesus said, "A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher." (Luke 6:40) When we apply such discipleship in the communal sense, the church demonstrates a model to the immigrants so that they no longer reside in their enclave. A secluded community may be a fine showcase of diversity in the host city; it is not the final destination for the new immigrants.

Unless the immigrant church actively pursues integration into the host culture, new immigrants will not be able to follow and seek the welfare of the city.

CONCLUSION

In Bible history, Daniel and his three friends, later Mordecai and Esther, and Nehemiah took Jeremiah's advice. They held key government positions and were able to act on behalf of their people in their host country.

May the words of Jeremiah remind us to seek the *shalom* of our fellow men and the *shalom* of the city through immigrant ministry.