

U. S. Power After 9/11: The Metaphor of Exile

James Klagge, Virginia Tech, Department of Philosophy
jklagge@vt.edu

Metaphors. As I am using the term, a metaphor is a characterization of something that may not be strictly accurate or literally true, but that has an important element of truth to it. A metaphor may get us to look at something in a way that we hadn't before, and make us think about it in a context that is new. Metaphors are not evaluated by their truth or falsity, but they are better evaluated pragmatically by the degree to which, or the ways in which, they help us to think more insightfully about a thing or situation.

The most interesting metaphor in the political/social/cultural/economic realm that has been offered up recently is Tom Friedman's claim that "The World is Flat". Up until some 500 years ago many people took that statement to express a literal truth. Now, though very few would take it to express a literal truth, Friedman thinks we should appreciate an important sense in which it expresses a metaphorical truth: In our post-11/9 world, it is as if the world were flat, considering how easy it is to communicate and conduct business globally. (Friedman latches onto 11/9 because that is the day the Berlin Wall fell.)

I mention Friedman only to remind us of the power of a metaphor. Even if we don't agree with Friedman, his metaphor has framed a discussion in useful ways, and, at least for a while, the discussion is improved by the perspective he has offered. It may be that eventually the metaphor will have worn out its welcome, and it will become more useful to frame the discussion in other ways.

I wish to offer another metaphor—primarily in the political and military realm: In our post-9/11 world, the United States is in exile. I offer this metaphor in a tentative fashion, because I'm unsure on the whole *how* helpful it is to think about our situation. In a world of refugees, evacuees, and persons displaced by forces beyond their control, it may seem surprising to view the United States itself as a nation in exile. But I do believe the metaphor frames certain issues, and gets us to ask certain interesting ques-



tions. If so, that will be its value. Is “exile” a useful metaphor for understanding the situation of the United States since 9/11?

History of the concept of Exile. People have doubtless been exiled for as long as there have been communities. In the Hebrew Bible we are rapidly introduced to Adam and Eve being cast out from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3: 23-24), Cain being sent away for killing Abel (4:14-16), and Hagar and Ishmael being turned out by Abraham for being a threat to Sarah and Isaac (21:10-21).

The concept of exile itself (Hebrew: *gôlâh*, *gālût*) takes shape with the Judean exile to Babylon in the period of 597 to 538 BCE. This pivotal event in Jewish history (or at least in Jewish story-telling) is mentioned in and inferred from the Hebrew Bible without ever fully being described (unlike the Exodus—another good metaphor—which is equally pivotal, but better known because fully described). The Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, captured Jerusalem in 597 and exiled the cream of the southern Kingdom of Judah, installing Zedekiah as ruler over those who remained (2 Kings 24: 8-20). (It is striking to note that Babylon was located only about 50 miles south of what is now Baghdad.) When Zedekiah proved disloyal, the Babylonians returned in 587 and sacked Jerusalem, destroying the Temple and deporting to Babylon many of those who had been left previously (2 Kings 25: 1-12). (It is hard to avoid comparing destruction of the Temple with destruction of the Twin Towers—“temple” of global capitalism.) Thus the main Judean community lived in exile in Babylon. When the Persians, under Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians, Cyrus allowed the Judeans (who by then simply constituted the Jews) to return to Jerusalem in 538 (2 Chronicles 36: 22-23). Many did, though not all.

While these are the external facts, the Judeans themselves (at least the ones who wrote the relevant portions of the Hebrew Bible) interpreted the exile as a punishment from Yahweh, saw their time in exile as a test of their faithfulness and as a preparation, and saw their restoration as promised and delivered by Yahweh.

the eighth adapting tests for protection: towers, can remain, the 1. cannot not

If restoration is the goal of U. S. power in the world after 9/11, what is the proper attitude of and towards others who have been displaced? For example, should New Orleans evacuees be returned to a restored neighborhood in the 9th Ward? Or are some restorations unfeasible? If no feasible levees can make parts of New Orleans safe for habitation, perhaps no exertions of power can make the U. S. safe from terrorist attacks and petroleum blackmail. Perhaps we must find other ways of living in the world, rather than controlling the world and, where necessary, insulating ourselves from that world. Perhaps there are forces that are simply beyond our power to dictate and control, and the lessons from Katrina should be applied more generally.

Lacking prophets in our own time, and so not knowing whether restoration of U. S. power and security is a certainty, perhaps the U. S. must learn to live in exile, in the same boat as others (to switch metaphors again), with other goals that work to build up the place to which we have been exiled—for on its welfare ours depends. What would it mean to “work for the good of” the world as it is now? Clearly this would mean finding ways to live in the world without being fully in control, learning to live with vulnerability,



and hence learning what it is like to be vulnerable—as so many others in the world are. Perhaps these are the lessons to be learned in exile—in our world after 9/11.