



Hope for Peace in a Broken World: *1 Chronicles, Exile and Building Walls*

Grace Ji-Sun Kim

The world abounds in clash of cultures, religions and beliefs today, as it has for millennia. In such contexts, how do we try to live peaceably with those who have differing opinions on how to live, worship, and believe. Such situations, in addition to the more mundane reasons based on wealth and land, often lead to wars, destroying each other's religions and building walls to sepa-

rate one another. We see this in the division of Korea into North and South Korea and the devastating consequences for a divided country. Today, our American context of immigration is resulting in a clash of cultures between various world religions as well as the difference in relations between religions and state, where, in Jewish and Muslim societies, the two are intertwined, while

in American Christian societies, the two are, in principle, separated. This article will examine the Book of 1 *Chronicles* to see how people in exile experienced sojourning, settlement, return and rebuilding and what its implications are for us are today. This paper will work towards how different religions, cultures and societies can peacefully coexist.

The Old Testament book of *Chronicles* is an example of Diaspora literature which was edited into its final form during the fifth-century Persian domination of all lands from the Indus to Cyrene and Macedonia. *Chronicles* is written to explain how a people who lived through a catastrophic event managed to survive, endure, and find freedom and hope to rebuild their lives. They were not content to let their oppressors have the last word or define their history as they searched to find meaning in their past and tried to move forward with their lives into a new future. The power to fight back, persevere and reestablish one's heritage is a strong message for us today.

Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 587 BC. In Judah, key aspects of Israel's past were suppressed and co-opted to fit the ideological requirements of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Part of that cultural suppression was the exile of Judean elite to locations in and around the

capital, Babylon, where much of the Old Testament was put to parchment. As with any event in which people are displaced, the exile had the consequence of effacing some of the crucial particularities of Israelite identity and silencing the subjects who constituted it, such as the tribes of Judah, Levi, and Benjamin, the Davidic dynasty, the Levites, the Jerusalem temple, the priesthood, and the Judean cult. This experience of the exile is still felt by Jews today. Many have similar experiences of being exiled during WWII from their homes in central Europe and in other parts of the world such as Asia where armed conflict and genocide caused many peoples to be exiled from their homes.

Living with Different Peoples

When exiles return home, their priorities and their sense of identity may not be the same as those of their parents. For the returning Israelites, the initial excitement and desire to rebuild the temple had worn off. The hope for the emergence of a new king, perhaps Zerubbabel² had also worn off. What remained was the grim reality of reestablishing a daily life in Judah. It is in this context that the Chronicler³ rewrote Israel's history. It was

1 Renita J. Weems, '1-2 *Chronicles*' in *The African Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* Hugh R. Page Jr. General Editor, p. 286-290 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 287, 288.

2 A governor of the Persian Province of Yehud Medinata (*Haggai* 1:1) and the grandson of Jehoiachin, penultimate king of Judah.

3 Because the author of this material is unknown, he has been designated 'the Chronicler.' Most scholars believe that 1 and 2 *Chronicles* originated in priestly circles and

written to the displaced people that there is hope for them and God is still with them. They are not a forgotten people, but a people whom God has chosen and loves. It becomes a compassionate book giving them a solid direction of how they are to proceed with their life as they return to their homeland dispossessed and damaged by the exile. The chronicler retells its history to remind the people where they have come from and how God has been with them throughout their history.

For the Israelites, to rebuild the community after the exile is a huge undertaking, which needs to be celebrated. As displaced people return home it becomes difficult or even torturous to pick up where one has left off. Nothing remains the same as all things are in a state of flux and old property rights may not be honored. Changes have occurred and foreign influences have taken root in Judah to give one the sense of loss of identity and history. People are intermarrying with foreign neighbors and there is an intermixing of history, culture and religions. A lot of anxiety can be experienced by those who have returned home and realize that it is not the way they had left it or remembered it to be. The returnees were forced not only to adjust to their new reality but also to rediscover God's purpose for

them under new circumstances.

Chronicles contains stories of people struggling to preserve their cultural identity, reclaim their historical memories, and find language to characterize their own identity.⁴ Those who remained and those returning need to negotiate how they will live together in peace and harmony. This identity crisis pervades cultures today and reconstructing the past which has been scrubbed clean by events may not be the way to do it.⁵

As the world has become increasingly interdependent and people are constantly moving to follow, or escape, from events of the day, it is difficult for immigrants, transients and people living in the diaspora to come to terms with their identity. Many are struggling to redefine themselves even though those in power are trying to do it for them. In this difficult space, it is crucial to reclaim the power to name and find themselves in relation to and separate from the dominant culture. Some people living in the United States today wanted a scrubbed image of the U.S. which 'existed' in their

4 Renita J. Weems, '1-2 Chronicles' in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* Hugh R. Page Jr. General Editor; p. 286-290 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 286.

5 This is particularly true following WW II, where the British, French, Dutch, Belgian, and American protectorates and colonies were dismantled, and arbitrary lines were drawn in the sand, dividing the mid-East and Africa into nations which did not necessarily follow cultural boundaries, as when the Kurds found themselves without a country, and split between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.

consequently they presume male authorship. Alice L. Laffey, '1 and 2 Chronicles' in *The Women's Bible Commentary* p. 110-115 edited by Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 110.

minds before all these new liberal ideas. If the 1960's lead us into exile because of women's liberation, civil rights movement, people of color, immigrants, so-called illegals caused our destruction some may feel that getting back to the good old days is what we need. It is important to recognize that the good old days never existed for much of the US as mansions and summer homes that had 20 bedrooms may have been the life of a few but not reality for the nation. The Chronicler may also be addressing such people who may have wanted the good old life back again. The Chronicler encouraged the people to move forward rather than backwards and to focus on rebuilding the temple. It is the temple which will bring all the key players together, the exiled and those who remained.

The book of *Chronicles*⁶ is inspired by the events of Israel's exile in Babylon and the subsequent return. In trying to recount these events, *Chronicles* reconstructs a cultural memory of the people of Israel. The exile and the return represent far more than theological metaphors. From the beginning to end, these traumatic events ordered all of Israel's past into a tension between two fundamental experiences: sojourning⁷ and settlement. The

tension between sojourn and settlement, exile and return, not only brings structure to the Chronicler's memory of ancient Israel; it also defines Israel's experience in terms of its relationship to the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires that shattered then shaped Israel's monarchical past,⁸ conjuring up some inescapable memories, which can cause problems for us today. Illegal aliens and desperate immigrants have shaped our history but it has become the "glorious past" and the current illegals, those people ostensibly living off our wealth - that have made it into our consciousness.

This experience of exile, even exile in place, as with the current Palestinian population living under Israeli rule or Kurds, left without a land, and dominated by Turkish or Iraqi rule, causes pain, anger and loss which can then be translated into hatred and acts of violence. We see this in the country of Korea which has experienced invasion, imperialism and division.

Korea and Japan

The Japanese invaded Korea and occupied Korea from August 29, 1920 to August 15, 1945. The Japanese presumed that they had every right to occupy Korea and do what

6 In the Hebrew tradition, the book of *Chronicles* is a single book, placed at the end of the Jewish Bible, the last book of the *Kethuvim*. See Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible, Tanakh Translation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999) 1712.

7 To stay somewhere temporarily, such as an

exile, followed by a return.

8 Gregory Lee Cuellar, *The Peoples' Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, edited by Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Wilda C. Gafney, Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, George "Tink" Tinker and Frank M. Yamada (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 526.



they wanted with the people of Korea. There was much brutality and a loss of Korean culture, identity and society. This was the distorted perception of reality that the Japanese people held in order to justify themselves that they are able to occupy another country.

My mother, used to tell me stories of the Japanese occupation of Korea. She told stories of her childhood experience of living on the run, fearful of being shot or being killed by land-mines, planted to injure or kill civilians. One such land-mine exploded as my grandmother was fleeing during the war. She was injured but she survived the explosion. During her childhood, my mother was terrified and could not fully overcome this terrible event. She lived a life of exile from her own city of Seoul

not knowing when it would be safe to return home. The consequences of such experiences have had grave effects on the lives of many Koreans and still haunt many who have lived through similar horrific ordeals. The difficulty of rebuilding lives after such trauma can have lasting effects on the generations who follow. The generations who follow are displaced, without a strong identity of home, place, religion and country.

Building Walls⁹

There have been many good reasons for building walls. Walls protect against aggressors, such as Hadrian's wall and the Great Wall of

⁹ This section is adapted from my blog post "Walls that Divide" Sojourners (Nov 3, 2014). Accessed March 28, 2016 [<https://sojo.net/articles/walls-divide>]

China. Even as we examine the Bible, there are references to walls. In Nehemiah, the survivors who remained and those who returned home are full of shame that “the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been destroyed by fire” (*Nehemiah* 1:3). The walls gave them protection and security against bandits as the only barrier to felons from the outside world.

For people today, we may have a very different perception of the function of a wall. There may be a negative understanding in a world where we have become hardened to the needs of the hungry, impoverished, malnourished neighbors who want to come into the U.S. just to work and feed their families. A wall exists at many parts of the U.S. and Mexican border to help America protect itself from foreigners who want to enter into the United States without proper documentation. In the decision to protect our country from undocumented people, we are preventing many people from access to food and a way of living which may not be available in their own home country.

Rather than having these attitudes towards the stranger, we need to nurture feelings of inclusion. Even along the U.S. and Mexico border, a wall exists which divides the two countries; a wall that provides constant surveillance to deter people from entering into the U.S. illegally, a wall built from the remaining metal landing scraps of the Gulf War, a

wall that expanded the role of the military's use of metal. The border has become militarized with patrols who treat migrants as prisoners. It symbolizes militarization, xenophobia, hatred, pride and fear of the other, a reminder of wanting to protect what is yours and not sharing what God has given you. Walls continue to go up as the American people continue to fear that the migrants will take away the jobs. There is an enormous amount of fear of the other which may poison the lives of the poor in both countries.

The walls went up in 1994 between the Mexican and U.S. border after the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which was intended to help with trade and the economic status of Mexico. However, it backfired and made the economic situation worse for the Mexicans. It was only the rich corporations and companies that benefited from the Free Trade Agreement as they were able to move their factories to Mexico where the labor was cheap and profits higher. What Americans fail to recognize is that the undocumented people do not cross the border to steal, to create problems, to fight or to murder, but to find jobs to provide for their families back home. Therefore, we need to rethink our border policies. Many Americans have actually begun to call the migrants ‘clutter’ and have reduced them to jetsum. As we ponder walls and the devastation caused by build-

ing them, we have come to recognize that we can't continue building walls to separate us from others. We need to replace them with prudent friendship.

A few years ago, I took a class to Mexico-U.S. border through BorderLinks, an organization that provides educational experiences to connect divided communities, raise awareness about border and immigration policies and their impact, and inspires people to act for social transformation. We visited the metal wall that separates the United States from Mexico at Nogales, Mexico.

Rich corporations and companies that benefited from the Free Trade Agreement as they were able to move their factories down to Mexico where labor was cheap and profits higher. As the economy of Mexico suffered, more people made their way, without documents, to the United States to seek work so they could support their families.

In 2006, the United States responded with the Secure Fence Act. As President George W. Bush signed the bill, he stated, "This bill will help protect the American people. This bill will make our borders more secure. It is an important step toward immigration reform." The act included provisions for the construction of physical barriers-walls-and the use of technology to forward these ends. This wall is under constant surveillance to prevent people from enter-

ing into the U.S. illegally.

The Korean peninsula is another example of a place that is divided by a great wall/barrier at the 38th parallel. The divided border is called the DMZ: a 'demilitarized zone,' created in 1953, after Korea was separated into two countries by the United States and the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. This division continues to generate fear and hostility.

I have visited the DMZ several times; the last time I took two of my three children to see it. They are too young to remember the visit.

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but every time I visit the DMZ I am overcome with emotion. The devastation of families separated, lives lost, friendships broken, and a country torn apart. It is a sign of despair, hatred, sadness, anger, division, and hopelessness.

At the border, there is a metal fence that divides the road traveling into the DMZ. Hundreds of letters, notes, flowers, and trinkets are woven into the fence, left by families and strangers to express the pain and longing that each person feels. Koreans want the two Koreas to unite so that the wall can be dismantled and families reunited. Brokenness needs to be healed.

This image is similar to that of the Berlin Wall that divided East and



West Berlin and Germany. It was built of bricks and other left-over war materials from WWII. It had barbed wire attack dogs, mines, and spotlights. It was a symbol of fear and the failure of a repressive regime. This Berlin wall is now gone, but the U.S./Mexico border reminds us of the Berlin wall. The walls are built to separate people and not to unite. It signifies the failure of American and Mexican policies to accomplish economic justice and the feminization and the powerlessness of the other, the dominated countries.

As we reflect on the significance of walls today, we need to do so in light of the passage in Nehemiah. The walls built today as

those in Nehemiah are not used functionally the same as the time in Nehemiah or in other cases in history to protect people from real dangers, such as the ancient cities of Europe¹⁰. Today, there may be walls around us that may be physically or socially built; some may be in need of repair. We have built walls as shortsighted ways of dealing with other countries, strangers and communities.

Korea has experienced war, and especially the exile of young women who were taken as sexual slaves for the Japanese soldiers. Korea has a history of such loss of culture, identity and community for many of its citizens. As a separated country it seeks reconciliation, solidarity and peace for its separated peoples, so the north can share the prosperity of the south.

Hope for a Broken World

It is important to recognize that in the midst of horror, God travels into exile and returns with us. God was in the gas chambers with the Jewish victims...and walking with the survivors into a new life that is far more important than whether the new life replicated the old. Life cannot be reenacted, but

¹⁰ <http://www.thetourexpert.eu/fortified-towns/>

the presence of God can be experienced in new lands or when one returns to traditional homelands.

The work of the church is not to simply accept the *status quo* as ‘God ordained’ and something which needs to remain in society. The church needs to challenge, critique and reimagine what the ‘reign of God’ needs to be like here on earth as political circumstances change, as when the two Germanys were reunited and violence ceased in Northern Ireland. In this way changes that help the poor, the dominated, the enslaved, and subordinated can occur. This is the mandate of the church for us today, retelling the reality of God walking with us from the past into the future.

1 and 2 *Chronicles* provided testimony that despite the destruction of the Temple and exile, the hopes and dreams of a national revival of Israel could never be extinguished. Israel’s future and destiny was tied to the God of its history and not to human powers. God is in control, ordering the destinies of empires and their inhabitants. Even though humanity believes that their human leaders control world events, the Hebrew Scriptures reinforce that God is in control of history. It is God who ultimately allows the Israelites to return to their land. This explains why *Chronicles* is the last book in the historical narrative Hebrew Bible¹¹ as it retells the his-

tory of God’s people from creation to their own salvation from exile. God reaches out and saves God’s people. God controls the world and we need to constantly come before and seek God’s wisdom and help in eliminating the evil structures of this world.

Today, we need to broaden our sense of our society to include the world and see if we need to restructure our lives so that others around the world can live more equally and in harmony with each other. *Chronicles* pulls us out of our comfort zones and encourages us to look at ourselves in the mirror to figure out if we are the ones who hold the imperialistic power and are dominating other countries. If we are, what steps we need to take so that we are not the oppressors, but are the liberators and are seekers who wish to build the reign of God in this world. There are some “allies” who can work with us and accompany the oppressed in their search for freedom and flourishing. We need to move forward and see how we can become agents of change in our new conception of a global society.

The concept of sojourning, settlement, and immigration are prominent concepts in today’s post-colonial world where people were displaced and may experience migration, such as the monumental displacement of Hindus and Muslims in the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. They are asked to settle in foreign lands and places, thus etching

11 Renita J. Weems, ‘1-2 *Chronicles*’ in *The African Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, Hugh R. Page

Jr. General Editor, p. 286-290 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 288.

exile and sojourning into the minds of displaced people. Thus it becomes essential to reflect on the experiences so that a positive impact can be made upon their lives. Positive feedback is crucial for their survival in a postcolonial world. Proper exegetical analysis is also needed so that people will not have misconceptions about those of our brothers and sisters who are displaced and have become strangers to us.

The world needs God to facilitate a peaceful world. America has benefited from being complacent. We have reaped the benefits of having lived in the American empire. Out of this comfort we need to ask ourselves if we are being true to the gospel which speaks of love; acceptance; and helping the sick, poor and lame, when it means all the sick, poor and lame. As we recognize our own participation in a global economic domination, we need to detach ourselves from interests based entirely on attaining wealth and access to cheap goods and work towards eliminating injustices, oppression, and domination in our world. We need to ask ourselves who represents us in this story? Furthermore, we must entertain the possibility that we may be similar to the Persians in this account, who have not yet released our grip on all of our economic and political vessels.

Conclusion

We may need to reflect on how to repair relationships that we have damaged or have created to be out of balance. Maintaining such imbalanced relations with African, Asian, Latin American and Middle Eastern clients creates the impulses which drive citizens of those clients into the hands of terrorist organizations, because they see no other escape or means of relief. As leaders within our own community or church, we need to examine where the walls of relationship have crumbled and how to delicately repair them.

As we think about walls and other barriers, we recognize that for such walls to come down we need to repair the damaged and broken relationships that built them in the first place. The hostility between the two Koreas needs to end. Peace needs to be restored on this tiny peninsula, my homeland. Walls can be torn down—walls that separate us from each other and keep families apart. As we endeavor in this work, our fears and hatred of the other need to be abolished. Communication, dialogue, trust, and mutuality need to be restored or created, where it has never been.

In the story of *Chronicles*, God never abandoned as the people thought that God did during the exile. The temple was gone and the exiled were taken away, but God never abandoned the people. *Chronicles* is talking to a community who has

been broken apart and scattered. The message that the Chronicler wants to share is that God is giving them a second chance. Thus community is very important to them. Rather than condemnation, we need to see grace and love of God that is so much greater than condemnation. In this narrative, there appears to be a love story. God is telling the people, “I love you, please come home.” There is a passion within the story of God saying that you may have misbehaved but please come home. Keeping the community together is important and it is in the community that one finds God. One needs to build the community. Today, we face similar challenges as we try to see what is best for the immigrant and diverse communities. We need to be able to sustain them and keep

the community together, above the miasma of racism, sexism, xenophobia and chaos.

People may become afraid of each other rather than come to know each other. If we are to live peaceably with each other of various cultures, societies and religions, we need to learn to “Embrace each other”¹². That can happen if we allow the Spirit of God to move us and live within and through us.

¹² For more discussion see Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Embracing the Other* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

