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DREAMING FROM EXILE
A Rereading of Ezekiel 47:1-12

Today there is a lot of talk about the Jubilee, but we all know that it is not just around the next corner. It is far from being a reality, and to make matters worse, it would seem to be moving farther and farther away. What is swarming around us is rather evidence of an anti-Jubilee: debts, exclusions, imprisonment, people without land or home, and people dying premature deaths. In spite of all this, however, we affirm the Jubilee because that is our task as Christians who believe in the resurrection, who believe in abundant life as a gift from God, and who have hope even in times of messianic drought.

Is it possible to speak of dreams in a situation that is systematically anti-utopian? How can those dreams be made credible when one cannot count on clear, meaningful signs that verify in some way their feasibility? Today the Jubilee is frequently mentioned as a beautiful dream. That visualizes justice in relations between human beings and between humankind and the rest of the cosmos, but how can we speak of it without emptying it of its power and trivializing it? I believe that one of the credible ways to do so is to speak from exile, and at the midpoint of the journey, staking one's hope on its future arrival. We encounter elements of this attitude in the oracles of the prophet Ezekiel that announce the restoration. I base this brief meditation on the prophetic vision found in Ezekiel 47:1-12. I am guided by questions related to who speaks of the Jubilee, from what context, when, how, and what is said.

WHO SPEAKS OF THE JUBILEE, AND FROM WHAT CONTEXT?

A deportee in Babylon, Ezekiel, from the sixth century B.C.E. The son of the priest Buzi, who assumed he was following the tradition of his father by preparing himself to serve God in the Temple. But things did not work out as he had hoped. The political and economic situation within Palestine was chaotic: in the face first of Assyrian and then of Babylonian power. And when Babylon conquered his homeland of Judah, Ezekiel, together with the king and others, was taken into exile in 598-597. It was the first of four deportations.

With neither Temple nor sacrifices, this man prepared to be a priest is called to prophesy from captivity, where he spends his entire life. From that location, he follows the events occurring between the Babylonian Empire and his insignificant country. In exile he receives three additional waves of deportees. To make matters worse, he hears from his location within the Babylonian Empire itself about the dreadful tragedy of the siege, conquest, and destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 589. Fire, violations, brutal deaths - the total demolition of the place of his origin - are images that build up in his heart. Yet even thus, powerless and in the very country that demolished his own, he has the power to see beyond that reality of desolation. He has the faith and the valor to envision a utopia of reconstruction.

When one speaks of the Jubilee, it is essential to have before one the concrete situation that one is experiencing: debts, poverty, unemployment, violence, discrimination,

exclusion, conflicts, sorrow, dehumanizing consumerism, the lethargy of the churches. For the Jubilee is the good news that supposedly puts an end to that reality of suffering and dehumanization. It is, obviously, much more than a "reconciliation" between poor and rich, debtors and creditors, the unemployed and employers, violators and those they have violated. If we speak of the Jubilee in a generic sense, the injustice is hidden, and the Jubilee loses its power and ceases to be Jubilee.

WHEN DO WE SPEAK OF THE JUBILEE?

That depends on the historical moments in which one is immersed. Ezekiel was living in exile and watching from afar his land being laid waste. It would be hard to make his message credible if he were to say that things would soon change for the better. Furthermore, it was not easy to mobilize the exiles. The first little group with whom Ezekiel himself went into exile was composed mostly of members of the nobility. They had little difficulty in accommodating themselves to the new situation. In fact, because of their social position they were not treated too poorly by the leaders of Babylon. But the other exiles of the subsequent deportations, who had few resources, also managed to accommodate themselves to their new situation. The majority found the novelties of such a powerful empire more appealing than the tiny, impoverished country of Judah that now was destroyed. Moreover, the question that dominated their thoughts was what they should fight for when their relative power was so thoroughly out of balance. Jon Douglas Levenson notes, "The exiles have passed the point of no-return. [None] of them could report back what the port toward which they were sailing on such a tumultuous sea is like. (2)

The prophet Ezekiel, however, does not allow himself to be crushed by that "tumultuous sea." He knows what the port is like. He dreams from exile and speaks of renewal at the midpoint of the Jubilee, in the twenty-fifth year of their exile. He says, "In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down, on that very day, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me there" (Ezekiel 40:1).

Visions are always full of symbolism. Twenty-five years signifies the mid-point of the Jubilee, when there was no way to turn back. If we consider the number fourteen symbolically as the double of seven, it would be the culminating moment in the period of a conquered city. That is to say, for Ezekiel or his school the moment has arrived to speak of the reconstruction of the conquered city and its Temple.

In the present reality of the global market economy, many people and even communities throughout the world live as immigrants or exiles in other countries. And from those alien places where they dwell they observe the deterioration of their own people. Many are homesick to return, but for the sake of survival they close off the ways back home. What is even worse, the governing powers of the countries in which these exiles live also close their doors to them. It is as if they are sailing without a course on the tumultuous sea, hoping for the light of a port that will grant them refuge.

In addition, many persons and communities in the poor countries live as exiles on their own continent. With the accelerated movement toward privatization, we have been thrown off our own lands, beaches, rivers, forests, and seas. We have even been alienated from our very selves, as we take on the values of the dominant cultures. When we

accommodate to those values and are charmed by the novelties of the market and by technological advances, we do not have eyes to see the misfortunes they cause. We also fail to strive and to remain vigilant to change things. From exile, both within and outside our own land, it is difficult for us to have visions, to dream dreams.

Furthermore, those of us who think differently are like exiled prophets. We have been exiled by the same technocratic and mercantilist current, exiled by the current of the ideology of a lack of faith and hope in more humanizing alternatives, exiled because solidarity becomes each time more tedious. No one wants to hear denunciations of exploitations and injustices, which are the messages of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. In the book of Ezekiel, for example, only denunciations and judgments are spoken of in the first forty chapters.

We have two challenges. One is to discern from our "exile" a new reality, in spite of the present realities that systematically deny it. We need the eyes of eagles to distinguish the port toward which we must sail. The second challenge is to convince our people that things will change. Ezekiel does it because he has the necessary confidence in God and believes he is a prophet sent by God. However, in order that our faith not be weakened, it is important to recognize that we are at the midpoint of the journey, and from now on the paths toward the Jubilee will be opening up.

WHAT IS THE JUBILEE ABOUT?

Very simply to affirm a life of dignity for all people in a context where justice, liberty, happiness, mutual solidarity, and graciousness prevail. Leviticus 25 describes the Jubilee with laws of justice. Jesus of Nazareth takes up the Jubilee in his ministry according to Luke 4. Other prophets do it with metaphors.

The visionary prophet relates his or her dream in poetry. Utopia is generally constructed in symbolic language. The poetic form penetrates hearts and consciences better than the literal or rational, because the former is less linear and more embracing or inclusive. Ezekiel envisions the Jubilee as a river. The vision is fascinating for the readers. It begins in 47:1: "Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east."

Ezekiel is guided by someone who makes him see how the water that flows from the house of God keeps on growing. It begins as simply some water that is flowing out the door. That water becomes a little stream. The guide makes him walk a thousand cubits through the stream that now is ankle deep. Then he makes him walk several thousand more cubits through water that now reaches his shoulders. Then the guide measures thousands more cubits, but now Ezekiel cannot pass through the river, because it covers him. Only by swimming can he continue further. And the guide says to him, "Mortal, have you seen this?" (47:6). Then they go out of the river onto the bank and return toward the city. The prophet observes the river with fascination, and the guide tells him of its prodigious powers.

The symbol of water permeates the account, occurring fourteen times in twelve verses. Most important is the symbol of the river, on a par with the symbols of the wilderness and of the Dead Sea - the latter an accursed place in Palestine where fish cannot live because of the huge quantities of salt. The river flows toward the Dead Sea, that place where there is no life. The waters from beneath the door of the house of God flow toward

the eastern region, the one most desert-like. They descend to Arabia and enter the Dead Sea. In that moment the waters are transformed into fresh, living waters. The river heading toward the sea has a miraculous power. The vision evokes the rivers of paradise, the Euphrates and the Tigris. The guide explains, "Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes" (47:9).

This is the vision that Ezekiel dreams from exile. It is his interpretation of the Jubilee, which has credibility because he offers it at the midpoint of the journey, as a way to make dear the distance still to be traveled to arrive at the Jubilee. In other words, we have to keep on sailing, opening paths, oriented toward the light that reveals the port toward which we are headed.

From exile, Ezekiel sees the radical transformation of a region in ruins, without life, and without signs of restoration. Curiously, the one who had prepared himself to be a priest sees his ministry unfold principally apart from the Temple, and he performs that ministry consciously. From the house of God flows water, scarcely a spring. It is the presence of God, who does not remain in the Temple. The river, as it flows through cities and fields toward the Dead Sea, becomes uncontainable as a project for the restoration of life, healing and revitalizing bodies, societies, and the entire natural habitat.

Those who did not have work now have it, without fear of losing it. The guide says, "People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; It will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea," that is, the Mediterranean (47: 10). This part alludes to life that is social and active. En-gedi and En-eglaim are situated opposite each other on the shores of the Dead Sea. In 47:11 the guide explains that the swamps and marshes will be "left for salt." Salt was important, not only to give flavor but also for industry.

In this dream one can observe a harmonious relationship between the natural order and humankind. No one will die of hunger or of illness, for the natural order will not cease to protect human beings throughout the whole year. It will produce even outside the normal season, because beneath it flows the water, symbol of the tender care of God for God's creation. And no one will dare to attack the natural order, because it is a friend who provides protection. The vision ends thus: "On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing" (47:12).

Before writing about the river, Ezekiel has the vision of what the Temple will be like; in fact, he dedicates seven rather boring chapters to the precise measurements of the plans for its construction. In the vision of the river the holy place of the sanctuary, where the impure are not permitted to enter, is surpassed by the life-giving presence of God outside God's house, even though the flow of water leaving the Temple is modest, barely a tiny spring. (3)

HOW DOES THE JUBILEE BECOME A REALITY?

This is the hardest question when one is speaking of utopias in times when hopes are vulnerable. The Jubilee of Leviticus 25 presents it by means of legislation. In fact, this is the most practical means, and it points toward feasibility. However, because it is a law it

can be avoided, manipulated, or imposed to such a degree that it produces the opposite of the intended result, because there is inevitably a sentence condemning whoever does not fulfill the law. The meaning is then inverted: whoever does not free the slave is taken prisoner, and whoever does not cancel debts can be condemned to death. Therefore, what must be emphasized in Leviticus 25 is the idea of a coming moment of liberation and the elimination of injustices. Perhaps it is for that reason that the prophets feel they must speak of a law written on the heart. In that way, one will love one's neighbor not because the law says so but through pure grace. At issue is a law permeated by grace.

In Ezekiel there is a deliberate, tense combination of grace and law in the attempt to resolve the problem. (4) The overflowing river, which is pure grace and without limit, occurs in the midst of lists of exact measurements, both before and after. In the previous chapters (40-46) the prophet presents the plans and measurements of the future Temple. After the description of the river that surpasses all measurements we again find exact measurements, but now as part of the legislation of an agrarian reform - that is to say, the egalitarian distribution of the lands among the tribes. These laws, perhaps "contaminated" by the river of God, surpass the Mosaic laws, for in Ezekiel 47:13 - 48:35 the immigrants not only will be respected as the law stipulated but will also have a right to the land, just like everyone else.

By this I want to say that the dream will always be a dream, and thus it should be an open horizon that invites us to be human beings with dignity, in order that we might reflect with increasing precision our creation in the image and likeness of God. For that is our identity as human beings, as seen from a theological point of view. But the dream is not sufficient if there are no projects, actions, and concrete laws directed toward it. Both are necessary, and they are in tension. And in that place, to the extent that one feels oneself to be near to that horizon, even in the little things, the Jubilee is in process of realization, the grace of God is being felt, and the water of the river is pleasantly refreshing us.

(Translated by Sharon H. Ringe; written in honor of Letty M. Russell)

NOTES

1. The central ideas of this meditation were presented in Spanish as a sermon on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Latin American Biblical University in San José, Costa Rica, in June 1998.
2. Jon Douglas Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976), p. 18. Translator's note: Tamez understands the second sentence of the quotation to begin with "none" or "no one," but the English original reads «now one," which appears from the sense of the passage to be a typographical error.
3. The Spanish in this case is un ojo de agua, literally, "an eye of water."
4. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restorations*, pp. 37-39.

EZEKIEL 47:1-12

1 Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. **2** Then he brought me out by the way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

3 Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. **4** Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. **5** Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. **6** He said to me, “Mortal, have you seen this?” Then he led me back along the bank of the river.

7 As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. **8** He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the seas, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. **9** Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. **10** People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-ge-di to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. **11** But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. **12** On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”