

Robert P. Hoch. *By the Rivers of Babylon: Blueprint for a Church in Exile*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013. 160 pages. \$18.

In the book, the author takes the term exile as the major theological theme. For him, it is an ecclesiological crisis that the church does not consider exile “a real, material phenomenon in twenty-first-century communities” (7) and spiritualizes it by losing sight of its concrete realities in our society.

The author identifies the contemporary exiles as undocumented migrant workers and immigrants, the homeless, prostitutes, and First Nations Peoples, who are victims of the economic and political systems and cultural invasions in our globalized world. He witnesses to the realities of these exiles by visiting and interviewing the people in six exilic communities in the US—Postville, Iowa; the House of the Butterfly in Tucson, Arizona; the Arivaca Camp in Altar Valley, Arizona; a homeless shelter in Dubuque, Iowa; the Cherith Brook Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, Missouri; and a Nez Perce Presbyterian Camp retreat in Idaho. The substance of the book is the author’s practical theological reflection on the actual realities of these exilic communities, for the purpose of challenging today’s churches to “[see] Christ amid the marginalized peoples” (48) and calling it to reconsider its identity and mission “as exile, among exiles, and as antidote to exile” (137).

The first six chapters of the book begin with the description of the reality of each community. As an eye-witness, the author narrates what is going on there by sharing true stories he witnessed to, which are horrific and depressing. Readers may be shocked to learn that such dehumanized realities coexist in our so-called affluent, democratic, and egalitarian society and feel hopelessly deadlocked over how to respond to the reality of exile as a community of faith.

The author’s intention is, however, not merely to uncover the actual reality of exile but to provide the church with a theological norm of what ought to be going on in the church. As a way to search for clues for hope for the exilic communities, he interprets Jeremiah 29, the story of Ruth and Naomi, the Gospel of Matthew, and other passages in the Old and New Testaments from the perspective of exile. His mutually correlated hermeneutical approach between the text and the context invites readers to appreciate those texts in light of the promise and hope God has made for humanity. Based on new meanings created from the biblical texts, the author develops “a theology of return” (81) and “a theology of clothing and nakedness” (26) for the twenty-first-century exiles.

In addition to biblical interpretation, each chapter includes stories of good practices that Christian and humanitarian organizations have done in order to bring political, economic, and cultural justice into the communities of exile. Actions taken by Casa Mariposa (“Butterfly House”), a center advocating immigration reform as well as serving as temporary sanctuary for undocumented migrants, by Frontera de Cristo, a missional organization working on the border between the US and Mexico, and by Café Justo (“Just Coffee”), a coffee-roasting cooperative striving to bring justice to farmers, are just a few examples the author gave, from which the church may learn about how to respond to the reality of exile.

In Chapter Seven, the concluding remarks of the book, the author has a lengthy conversation with sets of questions about what the church should be and how it should live out for the exiles in solidarity in a concrete and practical manner. In terms of the pragmatic task, how to build solidarity with exilic communities is a crucial issue for the church. Perhaps, a pastor’s question the author quoted, “The congregation I serve seems far removed from the exilic communities addressed in *By the Rivers*. How can I help the congregation get physically close

enough to such borders to actually challenge them?” (156), is a most realistic concern for many churches in the US. As the author suggests, it would be wise for the pastor to begin with critical reflection on our routine actions as living among displaced peoples.

Yet, the real challenge of the book is whether the church really wants to be partners of the exiles and is willing to be more creative and imaginative in thinking of and acting on fresh new ideas for its mission for the exiles. Throughout the book, the author’s masterful literary skills and poetic imagery are powerful enough to evoke empathetic imagination from readers. Furthermore, his process of practical theological reflection effectively guides them to explore new theological directions for the church “as exile, among exiles, and as antidote to exile.” At this point, this book is a valuable resource for teaching and learning practical theology.

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