

Permanent diaspora: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126

by [David P. Gushee](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

I spent my entire childhood in Vienna, Virginia. From infancy to my eighth year we lived on Hillside Circle. In the back yard, a swing took me up above a honeysuckle bush with every push from my mother. I can still smell the honeysuckle. Eventually Mom and Dad bought a nicer home, and although they sold it several years ago, I remember every beloved detail of the place. I can “return home” to experiences that happened in every room of that house, and especially in the front yard, which became our neighborhood baseball field.

These passages from the Hebrew Bible have to do with Israel’s return home from exile in Babylon. The reading from second Isaiah offers a prophetic anticipation of that return. The entirety of chapter 43 offers a beautiful and vivid reaffirmation of God’s redeeming love for this exiled people, Israel. Speaking in the divine first person, the text says, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (43:1). The passage promises Israel that she will be rescued and returned home in the sight of all nations, through the intervention of her loving God.

“For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation” (43:14). Then God will “make a way in the wilderness,” just as in earlier days God made a way in the sea and drowned the oppressors.

Any moment now, Israel will be going home. Israel’s God is not new, divine miracles of deliverance are not new, and where the people are going is not new, and yet God is “about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” This is a text perched on the borderline between hope and reality, promise and fulfillment.

Psalm 126 appears to reflect a moment just after that borderline has been crossed. *Just* after, not *long* after, because the brief passage splits halfway through. Verses 1-3 celebrate an event that has already happened. “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” And yet verses 4-6 offer a prayer for

the restoration of fortunes now that Israel is back home. The prayer is focused on a good harvest in the new land. Both passages mention God's provision of water in the thirsty desert. It is one thing to be home. It is another thing to have one's needs met once you get there.

Every earthly home is temporary. Every moment in which it seems that we have always lived here and will always live here is a moment of convenient forgetfulness.

The last time I saw my old home in Virginia was a few years ago around Christmastime. I was on a business trip, and I made the sentimental journey across town. Everything was different. The forested backyard had been stripped of its trees. The baseball field was gone, and with it the visible reminder of thousands of hours with my friends and with my father. There were kitschy Christmas decorations everywhere—huge inflatable monstrosities. I registered the shock, then fled.

Israel's experience of return from exile was also marked by disappointments. The glories the people envisioned for rebuilding the city and the temple gave way to more modest realities. The unity found in collectively yearning for home gave way to divisions experienced among those who went home and between those who went back home and those who stayed where they were.

The diasporic experience for Israel proved to be a lasting one. What began as exile eventually became a pattern for this resilient people, who learned to adapt their religion and their lifestyle to being a minority in foreign lands. Home was redefined: it could be found in any land as long as elements of rootedness such as family, Torah and synagogue could be carried forward into each new locale.

Christianity borrowed and embraced this loose relation to geography. I don't know any Christians who pray in the direction of Jerusalem. Ours is a mobile religion, equally at home on any continent in the world, in storefronts or backyards or bars or brick-and-mortar churches. An earthquake can destroy a church building, and the people of God will still have church on Sunday. You can count on it.

So, drawing too tight a connection to any earthly home fits neither with reality nor with Jewish or Christian history. Humans are too transient and so are our homes.

We will be shorn from all other homes until that day we find our home with God—or, rather, God with us: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:3-4).