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Experiencing God in a foreign land

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 groningen

Experiencing God in a Foreign Land

Theoretical and empirical explorations of the psychological links
 between religion and place among dispersed people.

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the
 University of Groningen
 on the authority of the rector prof. dr. E. Sterken
 and in accordance with
 the decision by the College of Deans.

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Prologue

By the rivers of Babylon

"By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion"

— Psalm 137:1

Over a dozen centuries ago between 586–538 BCE, the Israelites were stranded in a foreign land far away from their loved ones and home country. They found themselves in a place called Babylon. The book of Psalms 137 suggests that they were quartered “by the rivers of Babylon”, a strange place, where they were brought as prisoners of war to serve their capturers - the Babylonians (the world power at that time) - and work in their galleys. The rivers of Babylon were a place of solitude and isolation, far away from the places of concourse in the city of Babylon. For four generations, Babylon represented a place of bondage for the Israelites, and the experience in this foreign place remains in the memories of present-day Jews. Though not in the form of ancient Babylon, the concept of Babylon is still used today and much relevant as a metaphor for describing foreign and isolated places where specific minority groups are held in systemic captivity, lacking access to the same opportunities and resources that are available to the natives of those places due to a range of socio-cultural barriers and racial inequities—social advantages and disparities that affect different races within a particular place.

In this book, I draw on the concept of Babylon as an analogy to describe the experiences of the African diaspora, some of whom might have found themselves in foreign lands, “by the rivers of Babylon”, either through colonial or postcolonial migration at the hands of their colonial masters for reasons related to employment opportunities, study, or family, while others are compelled to flee due to war conflict, lack of opportunities, poor leadership, and internal politics. This is instructive for understanding the nature of the diaspora experience of people from the African continent who are dispersed across the globe, and some of whom are torn by the memories of their home countries and limited opportunities in a foreign land. In some ways, the lived experiences of the dispersed Israelite diasporas in Babylon may mirror

that of the dispersed African diasporas both past and present from the time of trans-Atlantic slavery (colonial) to modern-day (post-colonial) migration to the West.

Interestingly, one would have expected to see the ancient Israelites lose hold of their faith and belief in Jehovah God due to their captivity, especially considering how easy it is to throw in the towel when faced with life-altering challenges that question the core of our beliefs. On the contrary, historical accounts suggest that the torturous experience in the land of Babylon did not deter them nor throw the Israelites into despondency, rather it strengthened their faith and belief in the God of their forefathers. As they wept by the rivers of Babylon, they sang songs of praise and worshipped God in a foreign land despite the captivity and cruel bondage they were subjected to and endured. This narrative shows how difficulties experienced in foreign lands may be a springboard through which individuals may encounter God and experience more of God's presence in their lives, in such a way that this connection serves as a safe haven to turn for protection and a secure base from which to draw courage and build resilience in a strange environment. Quite like the Israelites in Babylon, this book proposes that seeking or maintaining an attachment to God, or having an encounter with God, in a foreign land among people of the African diaspora, dispersed around the globe, is an important spiritual resource to which they may turn in times of difficulties and from which they draw strength and courage to explore opportunities and cope with the challenges of life in a host country.

History shares the fate of once great and proud nations whose origin from indigenous territories now lies in a separate geographic locale due to involuntary mass dispersions. Most notably is the exile of the Israelites from Judea and the dispersion of Greeks after the fall of Constantinople in 29 May 1453. Other examples are the Transatlantic slave trade of Africans from central and western Africa that lasted for four centuries, the importation of Indians and Chinese people during the Coolie Trade, the mass emigration of Irish people during the Great Famine between 1845 and 1849, the exile of Circassians in the 19th century, and the present trend of voluntary immigration of people of African descent in search of a better life outside of their ancestral continent due to leadership failure, war-related forced displacement, and human rights violations. These past and present histories stir some emotions concerning the lives of those subjected, whether through voluntary or involuntary means, to such movements. One might ask, what were their lives like in the new abodes

and how did they develop their sense of place in a foreign land and coped with the great difficulties they faced?

Indeed, living in a foreign land can be quite a lonely and difficult experience, one which might stir a deeper hunger for an enduring relationship with God as a protective attachment figure and father. This assumption is more of a personal experience for me as the author than it is a lived experience of a collective, thus serving as my motivation for this research. After having lived in foreign countries almost half of my life, I have come to realise that there is nothing much stronger than having a personal relationship with God, who nourishes our spirit to thrive in the journey of life—even to faraway lands. I have often found myself torn apart negotiating my African identity in foreign places. This often leaves me wrestling with an identity crisis and a global identity that mimics the different places that I have lived in and the cultures I have experienced. Most striking to me is the fact that I have been denied access to quite a few ‘good’ things and experienced many challenges in foreign lands because of and despite my background. These experiences drew me closer to God than I had expected, thus making me turn to God when I was in despair or discouraged to draw strength and boldly explore his purpose for my life in places he has planted me in. I feel most connected to God during my prayer time and in times when I study the holy scriptures. I believe that this is not an isolated experience; many other people of faith in my position have similar experiences. I am convinced that a sense of spirituality in the form of seeking and maintaining a healthy attachment with God does play a crucial role in strengthening engagement with a foreign place or in whatever might be seen as a modern day ‘Babylon’ to one. My personal experience as a dispersed person separated geographically and emotionally from home country and loved ones has led me to ask the question: How do dispersed people in general experience God in a foreign land?

In short, this book explores the possibility of the intersection between individual spirituality and place experiences in a foreign land and highlights the psychological mechanisms that influence such outcomes. Different historical, theoretical, and empirical narratives are used to demonstrate how this intersection can be a useful framework for understanding the complexities involved in experiencing God in foreign lands among dispersed populations.