

# AMERICAN BABYLON



NOTES OF A  
CHRISTIAN  
EXILE

Richard John Neuhaus



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## Babylon Then and Now

THE TITLE MAY seem a bit melodramatic. Are we in Babylon? Are we in exile? Really? Speaking for myself, I know that a good many people think New York City is more than a little like Babylon, what with the babel of immigrant tongues, and the more ostentatious babel of sophisticates strutting their studied alienation from the America they have fled but know they have not quite left behind, and will never leave behind. "New York is not America," Americans like to say, and New Yorkers readily agree. "It's a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there." To which the New York rejoinder is that it's nice to have them visit but they wouldn't want them living there either. New Yorkers tend to be that way.

While there is an element of alienation between New York and America, it is not in that sense that this book is described as notes of an exile. Anyway, I confess to being more or less at home in New York, and, truth to tell, to being something of a chauvinist about the city. I

expect my friends are wearied of hearing me say it, but I have on occasion described the city—only half facetiously, of course—as the prolepsis of our hoped-for destination, suggesting that over the gates of the Heavenly City will be a large sign: “From the Wonderful People Who Brought You New York City—THE NEW JERUSALEM.” One adds—with a smile, of course—that people who did not like New York City in this life will have another place to go.

The title of the book, however, is not *New York Babylon* but *American Babylon*. I am somewhat uneasy with that choice of title. Too many people, and not only Americans, are all too ready to identify America with Babylon. For people in some parts of the world, and not only among European intellectuals, anti-Americanism is a major component of their identity. It has been said that any identity is better than none, but that is doubtful. It is a pitiable thing to purchase identity on the cheap by pretending superiority to the superior “other,” which is what America—as temporal orders are measured—undoubtedly is. America is Babylon not by comparison with other societies but by comparison with that radically new order sought by all who know love’s grief in refusing to settle for a community of less than truth and justice uncompromised.

As for the *Christian Exile* of the title, it is exile from that new order. Exile suggests alienation, but this book is not an exercise in the literature of alienation that was so popular a few decades ago. With the political posturings of Jean-Paul Sartre (if not always his enthusiasm for political tyranny), and the polymorphous perversities produced by the “beat generation,” sometimes drawing

on the moral gravity of Albert Camus and with unearned borrowings from the existentialism of the much earlier Søren Kierkegaard, alienation was not so long ago the required frisson for admission to the company of the intellectually serious.

That is not what I mean by exile. Kim Philby, who in the heat of the Cold War ran a ring of mostly homosexual spies who betrayed British agents to the “evil empire,” and who died an alcoholic in Moscow’s tender keeping, memorably said, “To betray one must first belong. I never belonged.” I belong, and I write for those who belong; for those who accept, and accept with gratitude, their creaturely existence within the scandal of particularity that is their place in a world far short of the best of all possible worlds. This world, for all its well-earned dissatisfactions, is worthy of our love and allegiance. It is a self-flattering conceit to think we deserve a better world. What’s wrong with this one begins with us. And yet we are dissatisfied. Our restless discontent takes the form not of complaint but of hope. There is a promise not yet fulfilled. One lives in discontented gratitude for the promise, which is to say one lives in hope.

And so, in this book I depict a way of being in a world that is not yet the world for which we hope. This means exploring the possibilities and temptations one confronts as a citizen of a country that is prone to mistaking itself for the destination. It means also a cultivated skepticism about the idea of historical progress, especially moral progress, when that idea defies or denies the limits of history upon which our humanity depends. It means sympathetic—and sometimes not so sympathetic—engagement with some of the more

troublesome, and more interesting, citizens of this present Babylon. The “new atheists,” for instance, who are enamored of antique arguments that seem never to lose their seductive charm. Of most particular interest are the “liberal ironists” who take their cue from the late Richard Rorty, perhaps the most influential American philosopher of recent decades.

The argument is that everybody lives in hope, including those who cannot give a reason for their hoping. For everyone, hoping can't be helped. The Christian reason for hope is intimately, indeed inseparably, connected with the history of the people of Israel. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, “Salvation is from the Jews.” Understanding the implications of that truth enables Christians and Jews to live together not only in mutual respect and dialogue but in a shared exploration of our public duties in this place of exile that is far short of the final fulfillment of Messianic promise. Among the most glaring indications that we are in exile is the necessity of contending for the most basic truth of the dignity of the human person. If we don't get that right, we are unlikely to get right many other questions of great moral and political moment.

So hope is the controlling argument, and exile in Babylon is the controlling metaphor. Babylon is both ancient history and the stuff of tomorrow's news. The ruins of the once famous (and infamous) city are in the suburbs of Baghdad in today's Iraq. Well over two millennia before the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Greek writer Herodotus, often called “the father of history,” brought the wonders of Babylon to the attention of the West. The name Babylon is a Greek form of the original

Akkadian name *Bab-Ilu*, which means “the gate of god.” Both literally and figuratively, Babylon has been the gate through which many gods have entered history. Today it is Allah, whose more aggressive adherents are forcing the West to ask painful questions about who we are—questions about our God and our gods.

I note in passing, although it is a matter of more than passing urgency, that there is still today in Iraq a substantial Christian community. Until a few years ago, there were close to 2 million Christians in Iraq. Now only 500,000 or even fewer remain, and their numbers are fast dwindling. Most of them are Chaldean Christians belonging to a church that is in full communion with Rome. They are among the oldest continuing Christian communities in the world. Their history of almost 2,000 years includes 1,400 years of living in uneasy co-existence with Muslims after Islam conquered what had been a Christian society. Most of the Chaldean Christians of Iraq have gone into yet another exile in America, establishing strong communities near Detroit, Michigan, and San Diego, California. The safety of the remaining Christian communities in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East is a matter of pressing concern for the Catholic Church and has long complicated Rome’s diplomatic relations with that part of the world. Those of us for whom Babylon is a matter of biblical history and religious metaphor should not forget the many Christians for whom Babylon is the all-too-frightening reality of jihadist persecution, extortion, and daily terror.

Most Christians remember the biblical Babylon in connection with the Tower of Babel. The story is found in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Genesis:

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Now the whole earth had one language and few words. As men migrated from the East, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Babel and babble. Ever since, human history has been marked by confusion and conflict, with conflict, as often as not, resulting from a confusion of language. Language is more than words and rules of grammar. Language is the architecture and building material of the narrative worlds we inhabit. Without language there is no community. And the theme that underlies and weaves together the chapters of this book is that we human beings were made for community.

In the narrative world of the West—that large slice of Greek-Jewish-Christian history once called Chris-



tendom and not yet securely named by any other name—the name Babylon has powerful resonance. There is the historical Babylon and the symbolic Babylon. The ruins of the historical Babylon outside Baghdad consist of widely scattered tells, or mounds—some as high as 90 feet. There, too, are the remains of the city walls enclosing a space of several miles wide and several miles long. Nearly a quarter of the space was occupied by royal palaces and religious buildings dedicated to various gods, with the temple of Marduk being the most prominent, followed by temples for Ninmah, Gula, Ninurta, Ishtar, and Nabu. And, of course, there is what is left—which is not much—of the ziggurat of Etemenanki, once a lofty pyramidal structure with outside stairways leading to a shrine at the top. In fact, it is now little more than a hollow in the ground, having been destroyed by the armies of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. The ziggurat was the Tower of Babel. To get to the top, the Babylonians went around in circles.

The historical Babylon gave rise to the symbolic Babylon. The Babylonian dynasty was founded by Nabopolassar 626 years before the birth of Christ and greatly expanded by his son Nebuchadnezzar, who figures prominently in the biblical narrative. (Some scholars call it the Neo-Babylonian dynasty because there was another one earlier, but that need not delay us here.) In 612 B.C., Babylon destroyed Nineveh, the great city that had been brought to repentance by the recalcitrant prophet Jonah. In 597 B.C., its imperial appetite whetted, Babylon attacked the kingdom of Judah and took Jerusalem captive.

The conquerors exiled many thousands of Israelites, including the prophet Ezekiel, and set Zedekiah up as

their puppet king. That did not last for long. Eleven years later, in 586, Jerusalem was destroyed, Zedekiah had his eyes plucked out, and most of the Israelites who remained in the city were deported to Babylonia. The Babylonian captivity, as it is called, lasted until Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. Cyrus permitted the Israelites to return and begin the rebuilding of Jerusalem and, most importantly, the temple in Jerusalem.

The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is riddled with references to Babylon—to both the historical and the symbolic Babylon. The First Letter of Peter concludes with this: “She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. Greet one another with the kiss of peace. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.” Was Saint Peter, the first of the apostles, writing from the Babylon in Mesopotamia? It seems very unlikely. There is no evidence of there having been a church in Babylon at the time. The Jews had been driven out of Babylon during the reign of Claudius in around A.D. 50, so there was also no active synagogue, and the missionary activities of the early Church were largely based on the network of synagogues throughout the Roman Empire.

Recalling the earlier Babylonian Captivity, Babylon came to be a symbol of exile in Christian thought. Exile is a prominent theme in 1 Peter. The letter is addressed “to the exiles of the Dispersion.” The author exhorts his readers to “conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” Later, Peter writes, “Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul.” The overwhelming consensus of the early church fathers and

of contemporary scholars is that in 1 Peter Babylon is a symbol for Rome, and that Peter is writing from Rome. The connection between Peter and Rome was virtually unchallenged until the sixteenth-century Reformation, when John Calvin and Desiderius Erasmus tried to dissociate the apostle Peter from the papacy in Rome. Moreover, the Roman connection is supported by Peter's specific reference to Mark, who is strongly linked with Rome (see Col. 4:10, 2 Tim. 4:11), and by 1 Clement, a letter written in Rome in about A.D. 96.

In the last book of the Bible—The Revelation to John, otherwise known as The Apocalypse—Babylon is a symbol for a place or idea. In Chapter 14 we read, “Another angel, a second, followed, saying, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion.’” Chapter 16: “The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath.” And the next chapter: “The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations.’” And in the eighteenth chapter: “Alas! Alas! thou great city, thou mighty city, Babylon! In one hour has thy judgment come.”

For the writers of the early Christian centuries, such as Augustine and Jerome, Babylon represented the power, arrogance, idolatry, and general wickedness of the Roman Empire. Also for Jews of the period, Rome was the new Babylon, for, like the first Babylon centuries earlier, the

Roman Empire destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. For both Jews and Christians of the first centuries after Christ, Rome was the persecutor of God's chosen people and was destined to fall. Babylon represents more than the empire, the city, and the culture of the city of Rome. As one authority puts it: "Babylon is the sphere of idolatry and worldliness under the temporary control of Satan, a worldliness in opposition to the people and the work of God, a worldliness epitomized first by Babylon and then by Rome. Babylon . . . is the antithesis of the Church as the Bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem, and the Kingdom of God."

That understanding of Rome as Babylon changed over time. After the bloody persecutions of Christians under emperors such as Nero and Diocletian, there came a time of toleration, acceptance, and even triumph. Already by the end of the second century, the church father Tertullian sensed what was happening in his famous observation, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." With the ascendancy of the emperor Constantine, Christianity was officially tolerated, and by the end of the fourth century it was the established religion of the empire. It seemed that Babylon had indeed fallen, just as the Book of Revelation had predicted, and Rome was on its way to being transformed into "the eternal city," no longer representing Babylon but the eternal hope proclaimed by the Church.

This triumphant reading of history was espoused by Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea who is called "the father of church history." His *Ecclesiastical History* presumes to trace God's purposes—from Old Testament prophecy through New Testament fulfillment to the providential

events unfolding in the fourth century. His *Life of Constantine* is a panegyric in which the emperor is depicted as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in which the throne of King David is established forever. Today, and even in his own time, Eusebius' hyper-confident reading of history was widely disputed. The triumph that he celebrated is often derided as "Constantinianism," the precursor to centuries of "Christendom," and is frequently viewed not as the triumph of the Church but as its fall into a new "Babylonian captivity" in which it became captive to the temporal power it presumed to wield.

From the beginnings of the Christian movement up to this day, there have been endless disputes about what it means to say that Christians are "in but not of the world." All accept the words of Jesus that we are to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. But there is continuing argument about what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. When Christian faith is most vibrant, the accent is on not rendering to Caesar what belongs to God. But there is no reason to doubt that those who, like Eusebius, relaxed the tension, and even conflated the realms of Caesar and God, were also acting in good faith. Over the centuries there has been conflation of church and state, coexistence of church and state, separation of church and state, and multiple other arrangements, none of them entirely satisfactory. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church says that we should "read the signs of the times," and, in fact, Christians have been doing that since the time of the apostles and are doing it today. Different times, different signs.

The apostle Paul depicts the Church as being in a state of conflict with the temporal powers of the world

around it. In the sixth chapter of Ephesians, he says: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." It would seem that Babylon has not definitively fallen, and will not definitively fall, until it is finally displaced by the New Jerusalem of biblical promise. For the Christian, the warfare has not ended; we are still far from our promised home.

The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews dramatically portrays the continuing struggle of the saints who, because of persecution, could have no doubt that the cities of men were far from the City of God:

They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they were destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering over deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. . . . For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Note the tension. We might call it the dialectic. Some see it as a contradiction. On the one hand, we have come to Mount Zion, the New Jerusalem. On the other, we have here no lasting city but seek the city that is to come. This is frequently described as the “now” and “not yet” of Christian existence. Christians live “between the times”—meaning between the time of Christ’s resurrection victory and the time of its cosmic fulfillment in the coming of the promised Kingdom. All time is time toward home, time toward our true home in the New Jerusalem.

And so it is said that there is a continuing tension between the “this-worldly” and the “other-worldly” dimensions of Christian existence. Some Christians put the accent on their duties to making this world a better place to live, to making this world more home-like, so to speak. There are even those called postmillennialists who believe that Christ will not return in glory until we have established a millennium of justice and peace, making the world worthy of his kingly rule. This has at times in Christian history, and not least in the history of Christianity in America, served as a powerful incentive for social and political activism on the part of Christians. In this view, it is as though we really can turn Babylon into the New Jerusalem by means of radical reform.

There is good reason, however, to question the ways in which this-worldly Christianity is pitted against other-worldly Christianity. Other-worldliness is often derided as escapism from the problems and tasks of the here and now. It is, according to many critics, a piety focused on “pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye.” One thinks of the old hymn, “I’m but a stranger here /

Heaven is my home.” We should at least entertain the possibility, however, that other-worldly hope can intensify one’s engagement in the responsibilities for this world. The *other* in other-worldly is not entirely other. It can be anticipated in this world fulfilled and transformed, at least in part. In this world that is worthy of our love and allegiance, we are prepared for what is to be. The Book of Revelation speaks of a new heaven and a new earth in which those who are faithful in their time are at last at home:

*They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;  
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.  
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of living water;  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

Even in the Babylon of the present, the New Jerusalem that “comes down from above” is anticipated. The word for this is *prolepsis*, an act in which a hoped-for future is already present. The entirety of Christian existence and of our efforts in this world can thus be understood as proleptic.

For Christians, the supreme act of prolepsis is the Eucharist, in which we take bread and wine in obedience to the command of Jesus and “do this” in remembrance of him. Thus is the Eucharist, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, the “source and summit” of the Church’s life. It is a supremely *political* action in which the heavenly *polis* is made present in time. The eucharistic meal here and now anticipates, makes present, the New Jerusalem’s eternal Feast of the Lamb. So it is that



in the eucharistic liturgy Christians say that they join their song to that of “the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven” around the throne of the Lamb, meaning Christ the Lamb of God who was sacrificed for our salvation. In this act, past and future are *now* because, as the Lamb says of himself, “I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Christ is the A and the Z of the human alphabet construed to tell the story of the world.

In this understanding, it is not a matter of “balancing” the other-worldly against the this-worldly, or the this-worldly against the other-worldly. Each world penetrates the other. The present is, so to speak, pregnant with the promised future. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” declares the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Charged as in electrically charged; the present is given new urgency, raised to a new level of intensity, because it is riddled through and through with what is to be.

And yet, the “not yet” weighs heavily in the Christian understanding of our place and time in the earthly city. Babylon has not yet been displaced by the New Jerusalem. The early Christian writers embraced the understanding of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Yes, a new world has begun with the resurrection of Jesus, but the “principalities and powers” still rage against the new order that has been inaugurated. No flights of other-worldly piety, no “raised consciousness” of the gnostics, provides escape from the burdens and duties of the present. According to Jeremiah, it is the God of Israel who has sent his people into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Writing in the sixth century B.C., Jeremiah counsels the exiles:

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Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Exile remains exile, and Babylon remains Babylon, but both are penetrated, both are charged, by the promise of deliverance. For Old Testament Israel, deliverance is understood as return and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. For New Testament Israel, deliverance is arrival at the destination of the long pilgrimage toward the New Jerusalem.

The Christian language of exile and return is drawn from the Old Testament. And so also is the language of a final destination, a language that is not limited to return and restoration. A hundred years before Jeremiah, the prophet Isaiah wrote of what "will come to pass in the latter days." There will appear one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord will rest, and he will establish a kingdom such as has never been before. In that kingdom,

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.*

*The cow and the bear shall feed;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*The suckling child shall play over the hole of the asp,*

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*and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.*

Obviously, this passage envisions more than a return to Jerusalem and the restoration of the city that was. And yet, the city that was and the city that now is is the prolepsis of what is to be. The promise of what is to be—the other-worldly, if you will—intensifies the devotion to the earthly city. Psalm 137 is among the most moving expressions of this sense of exile and return, of loss and hope, of sorrow and trust:

*By the waters of Babylon,  
there we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our lyres.  
For there our captors  
required of us songs,  
and our tormentors mirth, saying  
"Sing us the songs of Zion."  
How shall we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy!*

The psalmist cannot sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land, and yet he cannot *not* sing the songs of Zion, even though in a foreign land. This is evident in his singing the song of Zion that is Psalm 137. His singing of this song of Zion intensifies the awareness of being in a foreign land, even as it is hope's participation, however partial and preliminary, in a world elsewhere.

Meanwhile, we seek the peace of the city of our exile. The story told in the Old Testament Book of Daniel is instructive. When in 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar moved against Judah, he demanded tokens of submission, including young men from the royal and noble families. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Their captors gave them Babylonian names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The young men went along with that, although I expect that in private they called one another by the old names. Those old names meant something. For instance, Daniel means "God is my judge," while Belteshazzar refers to a goddess who protects the king. They went along with a lot of things. We are told that they were educated for three years in the lore of Babylon. This would involve learning the very difficult Akkadian language and studying the Babylonian creation and flood stories, along with how to tell the future by observing the stars, discerning the patterns of oil in water, reading the spots on sheep livers, and the like. After all, they were being trained to serve as Babylonian wise men. They succeeded so well in the ways of Babylon that the king made them governors of the empire's several provinces.

But there was a limit to their going along. We read in Chapter 3 the announcement by the herald of the

king: "You are commanded, O people, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace."

When the king heard that the young Judeans had refused to fall down and worship the golden image, he had them brought before him and declared, "If you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace; and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego responded: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up."

The king was "full of fury" and ordered that the fiery furnace be heated seven times hotter. It was so hot that the guards who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the flames died of the heat. From a safe distance, the king saw not three but four men walking in the flames and exclaimed, "The appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." He called Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to come out of the furnace and they emerged unharmed. Upon seeing this, the king cried: "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him, and set at nought the king's command, and yielded

up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.”

Then the king issued a decree that terrible things would be done to anyone who spoke against their God, and he promoted the three to new positions of authority in Babylon. A dramatic tale with a happy ending, we might well say, and it is that. Beyond that, however, the story illustrates what it means to seek the peace of the city of our exile. The young Judeans went along with a great deal but drew the line at worshipping a false god. Much better to die than to violate the first commandment of the Decalogue, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

In the first centuries of the Christian movement, martyrs went singing to their deaths rather than do something so seemingly innocuous as burning a pinch of incense before the statues of emperors who had been officially deified. Also today, Christians worry about the ways in which accommodation to this foreign city can become betrayal. At least they should. The temptation to worship false gods usually presents itself in subtle forms. It does not usually announce itself with the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music.

Such are the uncertainties, and the awesome stakes, in this dialectic, this complex back-and-forth of remembering and anticipation; of living the brief moment of what *is* between what *was* and what *is to be*, never losing sight of a destination that transcends history but does not leave history behind. The “new heaven and new earth” of the Book of Revelation does not abandon *this* heaven and *this* earth. Rather, they are taken up into

transcendent fulfillment. It is not as though this earthly city grows and develops into the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. It is not a matter of historical progress but of eschatological promise.

*Eschatology* refers to the last things, the final things, the ultimate destination of the story of God's dealings with the world of his creation. In the Christian view, that destination, that *eschaton*, has already appeared within history in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As the New Testament scholar N. T. Wright nicely puts it, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus is not a story about a happy ending but about a new beginning. In the resurrection and in the abiding presence of the resurrected Lord in his body, the Church, the absolute future breaks into present time. Because the principalities and powers rage against the new world order inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus, that future is discernible only by faith. In the words of Saint Paul, "We walk by faith, not by sight." That Jesus was raised from the dead is convincingly demonstrated as historical fact; accepting the implications of that fact is to walk by faith.

Christians do not—or at least they should not—claim to understand the intricacies of God's workings in time and through time. The details of the working out of the relationship between the immanent—the here and now—and the transcendent are not within our human competence. The Christian claim is that God—the Absolute, Being Itself, the Source and End of all that is—has invested himself in the human project. This happened in the Incarnation, when the Creator, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, became a creature in Jesus the son of Mary, a truth vindicated in the resurrection of

the Son of God. God's investment is irrevocable, and therefore the human project cannot fail, not finally.

Obviously, we're into deep theological waters here. What Christians can say about the particulars of God's purposes in history leaves us stuttering and tongue-tied. We can attend closely to what is revealed; we can try to read "the signs of the times"; we can study, discuss, debate, speculate, and then pray for the grace to act in the courage of our uncertainties. But at the end of the day, we say with Paul, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." These are words from Paul's unsurpassable hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13. We walk by faith in faith's disposition toward the future, which is hope, relying on the cosmic triumph of the love revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus Paul's conclusion: "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

What an extraordinary mix! The now and the not yet, the this-worldly and the other-worldly, the transcendent and the immanent, promise and fulfillment, time and eternity, time toward home and the prolepsis of home in time. That mix is both the burden and the grace to bear the burden of pilgrimage. The People of God is a pilgrim people. As Israel is a pilgrim people, so it is said in the eucharistic prayer of the Mass, "Strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim Church on earth."

In the chapters that follow, there will be occasional reference to *City of God* by Saint Augustine of Hippo. The references are occasional, the influence is pervasive. Writing in the fourth and fifth centuries, the bishop of Hippo Regius, located in what is now Algeria, wrote the



story of the world, from creation to eschaton, in terms of the contrast and conflict between the City of God and the “city of man” or “the earthly city.”

The earthly city of Augustine’s time was the Roman Empire. The earthly city to which this book attends is chiefly, but by no means only, America. Augustine’s *City of God* provides a conceptual framework. Literary critics speak of an “inhabitable narrative,” which catches the matter nicely. For Augustine, the biblical narrative provides the drama of which we are part. *City of God* weaves into that narrative Augustine’s penetrating insights into the possibilities and limits of the human condition. He is a master of subtlety in analyzing the desires, both rightly and wrongly ordered, of the human heart. He provides arguments, interpretations, principles, and rules, but—and this is most important—one derives from his writings what is best described as an “Augustinian sensibility.” It is the sensibility of the pilgrim through time who resolutely resists the temptation to despair in the face of history’s disappointments and tragedies, and just as resolutely declines the delusion of having arrived at history’s end.

This sensibility builds on Peter’s understanding of Christians as “aliens and exiles.” It is a way of being in the world but not of the world that is finely expressed in *The Letter to Diognetus*. The letter was written by a Christian, possibly toward the end of the first century, to Diognetus, a pagan who was curious about the way Christians thought of their place in the world. The author explains: “Though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but

they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a homeland, and any homeland is a foreign country.”

The author goes on to point out that Christians reject certain practices of the Roman world. For instance, they refuse to abort their children or to practice infanticide by exposing their children to the elements, as was common among the Romans. Christians recognize, says the letter writer, that they are viewed as alien, and are not intimidated by that. On the contrary, they rejoice in it. As the soul is to the body, so are Christians to the world. As *The Letter to Diognetus* puts it, “The soul is captive to the body, yet it holds the body together. So Christians are held captive to the world, and yet they hold the world together.” And that is because they are the bearers of the true story of the world, whether the world wants to know it or not.

The title *American Babylon* will likely puzzle, and even offend, some readers. There is in America a strong current of Christian patriotism in which “God and country” falls trippingly from the tongue. Indeed, God and country are sometimes conflated in a single allegiance that permits no tension, never mind conflict, between the two.

I would be disappointed if readers did not recognize that this book is animated by a deep and lively patriotism. I have considerable sympathy for Abraham Lincoln’s observation that, among the political orders of the earthly city, America is “the last, best, hope of mankind.” Although it was added late to the Pledge of Allegiance, the affirmation that we are a nation “under God” is not unimportant. It does not mean that we are God’s chosen

nation—and we should be uneasy even with Lincoln’s sharply modified claim that we are an “almost chosen” people. Nor does it mean that we are immune to the temptations and tragedies of all earthly orders. To say that we are a nation under God is to say, first and most importantly, that we are a nation under transcendent judgment. Judgment and promise are inseparable.

People speak of a “critical patriotism,” and certainly patriotism should not be unthinking. But with critical patriotism it sometimes seems that the adjective overwhelms the noun. The result is a contingent devotion—devotion to one’s country if only one’s country were a different country than it is—which is no patriotism at all. The noted poet of the early twentieth century, Richard Wilbur, strikes a balance between criticism and devotion when he invokes the memory of those who have gone before:

*Whose minds went dark at the edge of a field,  
In the muck of a trench, on the beachhead sand,  
In a blast amidships, a burst in the air. . . .  
Grieve for the ways in which we betrayed them,  
How we robbed their graves of a reason to die:  
The tribes pushed west, and the treaties broken,  
The image of God on the auction block,  
The Immigrant scorned, and the striker beaten.  
The vote denied to liberty’s daughters.*

Nonetheless:

*From all that has shamed us, what can we salvage?  
Be proud at least that we know we were wrong,*

## AMERICAN BABYLON

*That we need not lie, that our books are open,  
Praise to this land for our power to change it,  
To confess our misdoings, to mend what we can,  
To learn what we mean and make it the law,  
To become what we said we were going to be.*

But even such critical patriotism, rightly understood, does not relax for a moment the keen awareness that our true *Patria* is not yet. For those whose primary allegiance is to the City of God, every foreign country is a homeland and every homeland a foreign country. America is our homeland, and, as the prophet Jeremiah says, in its welfare is our welfare. America is also—and history testifies that this is too easily forgotten—a foreign country. Like every political configuration of the earthly city, America, too, is Babylon. It is, for better and worse, the place of our pilgrimage through time toward home. Until the human pilgrimage reaches that destination, which I expect is no time soon, we cannot help but, through our tears, sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land.