

## ***The Period Between the Testaments II. Religious Development***

**F.F. Bruce**

[p.59]

In our former paper on the period between the Testaments we considered the stages by which the political situation at the close of Old Testament history, the rule of the Persian kings, gave place to that which confronts us when we open the New Testament, the worldwide sway of the Roman Empire. We are now to look at some of the features of Jewish religious development during those four centuries.

Under the Persian Empire the position of the high priest became more important in Judaism than it had been before. The civil governor of Judaea was an official of the Persian Empire, and only exceptionally was the governor a Jew: Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are such exceptions. In those matters therefore in which the Jews enjoyed a measure of autonomy the high priest tended more and more to be regarded as the leader of the people. This tendency continued into the Greek period, and the Hasmonean rulers knew what they were doing when they arrogated to themselves the high priesthood as well as the civil and military leadership. When the Hasmonean dynasty fell and the Jews passed into the Roman Empire, the high priest retained the title “leader of the nation”, and as president of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish people, he retained great power until the old order was swept away in the destruction of A.D. 70.

An interesting sidelight on Jewish life outside Palestine is afforded by a collection of papyrus documents, written in Aramaic, found in and around Aswan, in Egypt. (Egypt was a province of the Persian Empire from 525 B.C. onwards.) These documents belong to the fifth century B.C. and emanate from a Jewish colony which had been planted there about 590 B.C. to guard the southern frontier of Egypt. On the neighbouring river-island of Elephantine this colony had a temple of Jehovah. When that temple was destroyed in a pogrom in 411 B.C., the colonists obtained official permission to restore it, through the good offices of the Persian governor of Judaea, and to “offer meal-offerings and incense upon, that altar as was done formerly”. Another of these documents, belonging to the year 419 B.C., contains instructions from the Persian court regarding the manner in which the colonists were

[p.60]

to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread in that year. This official interest taken by the imperial government in the details of Jewish religious practice affords a noteworthy illustration of some of the official Persian decrees quoted or referred to in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The dominant Zoroastrian religion of the Persian state was not without its influence on Jewish thought in this period. Some of the Jewish literature belonging to the inter-testamental period bears clear marks of Persian influence. This influence appears especially in a number of eschatological ideas and in a highly developed angelology and demonology. The angels and demons who play such an important part in the apocryphal book of Tobit, and much of the eschatological imagery in the so-called book of Enoch, can without difficulty be traced back to Persian conceptions. In the book of Tobit the angel Raphael who accompanies the young

Tobias incognito is simply the Persian guardian angel or ‘spirit-counterpart’ (Pers. *fravashi*) supplied with a Hebrew name, and the demon Asmodaeus is the ‘angry demon’ of Zoroastrian literature (Pers. *Aeshma-daeva*).

The Persian period also saw the rise of the synagogue, an institution which was to play a most important part in Judaism in later centuries. The primary purpose of the synagogue was for the reading and exposition of the Law. It met a very real need among the Jews of the dispersion, who lived at a far distance from the Temple at Jerusalem, but it was established throughout Palestine as well. Thanks to the synagogue, Jewish religious life did not cease when the Temple fell in A.D. 70, but survived in a more durable form than was possible under a régime of obsolete sacrifices.

After the return from captivity, Aramaic gradually displaced the sister-language Hebrew as the common tongue of the ordinary people in Palestine. When they came together to hear the Scriptures read, it was necessary that they should be provided with a translation into the language that they knew. The origin of these Aramaic translations or “Targums” may be found in Nehemiah 8:8. For several centuries they remained oral translations only; it was only at a later date that they came to be written down. The appointed reader in the synagogue would read the Scriptures in Hebrew, and he was followed by a translator or *methurgeman* who gave an oral paraphrase in Aramaic. Some of the Old Testament quotations in the New Testament show signs of these Targumic paraphrases.

[p.61]

Outside Palestine, translation into yet another language became necessary after the establishment of Alexander’s Empire. When Alexander conquered Egypt in 331 B.C., he founded the city of Alexandria, which became the capital of the dynasty of the Ptolemies. Large numbers of Jews settled in Alexandria, and in this Greek-speaking city they soon forgot their Hebrew or Aramaic speech. It was for their requirements that the Hebrew Bible came to be translated into Greek—a process which began about 280 B.C. and went on for something like 150 years. This Greek translation, unlike the Aramaic Targums, was not confined to the oral form, but was put in writing from the start. It is usually called the Septuagint (from Latin *septuaginta*, “seventy”) on account of a later legend that it was the work of seventy or seventy-two men who were summoned from Jerusalem to Alexandria by one of the Ptolemies to undertake the translation. The earliest known form of this legend appears in the “Letter of Aristeas”, a work dating c. 100 B.C. Later embellishments of the legend tell how the translators were put in separate cells, and how at the end of seventy-two days the seventy-two translations were found to be completely identical.

To leave legend for ascertainable fact, we find that the Pentateuch was first translated, and a sort of “authorized version” of it was established. Certainly the Septuagint text of the Pentateuch is in a much more stable condition than the Septuagint texts of the other parts of the Old Testament.

While Greek-speaking Jews were the first and direct beneficiaries of the Septuagint, others profited by it as well. It performed a sort of missionary function, for by its means Gentiles were able to read the Old Testament Scriptures in their own tongue. In this way the Septuagint helped to pave the way for the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentile world. For the Septuagint was the Bible which the earliest Christian missionaries took in their hands as they went on their journeys through the provinces of the Roman Empire, in the earliest decades of

Church history when as yet there was no New Testament. The Septuagint provided the form in which most of the New Testament writers quote Old Testament Scripture, and it also provided them with a theological vocabulary. The New Testament writers did not have to invent a Greek theological vocabulary; the words they required to express the great concepts of divine revelation such as righteousness, mercy and truth, sin and atonement, and the

[p.62]

like, lay ready to their hand in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. When we meet such terms in the New Testament, we must remember that their background is not to be looked for in the senses which they bore in pagan Greek speech, but in the senses which they bear in the Septuagint as the equivalents of the corresponding Hebrew terms.

About a hundred years ago Grinfield, one of the great Septuagint scholars of last century, declared that “whoever studies the Greek New Testament in conjunction with the Septuagint will obtain such a conception of the unity of the Bible, as never could be obtained from the study of two discordant languages”; and although much has been learned about these subjects since his day, his words may still be noted with advantage.

With the passing of world-empire from the Persians to the Greeks, the Jews were exposed to religious and intellectual influences from another quarter. In addition to the sheer paganism of Greek religion, which Antiochus IV attempted to impose on them by force, there were the more subtle and refined influences of Greek philosophic thought. These latter influences are seen in the “Wisdom” literature of this period. There was a long tradition of “wisdom” literature in Israel, from the days of King Solomon, who “spake three thousand proverbs”; but the treatises in praise of wisdom which appeared in the Greek period reflect various trends of Greek thought, while remaining loyal to the basic tenets of Israel’s faith. There are two outstanding examples of this “Wisdom” literature included in the apocryphal books.<sup>1</sup> One is the book called Ecclesiasticus, or “The Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach”, written in Hebrew in Palestine about 200 B.C. and translated into Greek by the author’s grandson about 132 B.C. The other is the book of Wisdom (the so-called “Wisdom of Solomon”), written in Alexandria at a considerably later date.

The book of Ecclesiasticus reflects the outlook of a pious man of the old school at the beginning of the second century B.C. The only kind of immortality the writer cares about is posterity’s remembrance of a man’s virtues. The best known passage of this book, “The Praise of the Elders”, celebrates this kind of immortality; it is the passage beginning “Let us now praise famous men”, so frequently read at commemoration services.

The Old Testament has but little to say about resurrection and

[p.63]

the future life. These topics are not entirely absent from its pages, but they have nothing like the prominence that they have in the New Testament. Long life in the land which the Lord their God gave them bulked more largely in the eyes of most of the pious than the life of the world to come—up to the time of the writer of Ecclesiasticus. The persecution under

---

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Bruce’s reference to the apocryphal books acquires additional interest for the BIBLE STUDENT if he reads Dr. R. Laird Harris’ article about “the Apocrypha “ on page 74 as a supplement to Mr. Bruce’s.—Ed.

Antiochus Epiphanes led to a great quickening of the resurrection hope. This was the first time that Jews were persecuted on any great scale explicitly for their religion; under Antiochus the fear of the Lord led in many cases to an early martyrdom and not to length of days. The martyrs had faith to realize that their loyalty to God could not have death as its final issue—and thereafter the gloom of Sheol. The hope of resurrection suddenly blazed up and burned brightly before their eyes. It is probably they who are meant in Hebrews 11:35: “others were tortured, not accepting deliverance (which they could have won by apostasy), that they might obtain a better resurrection.” From this time forth the doctrine of the resurrection was firmly established in Jewish faith, except among the Sadducees. As the Lord Jesus pointed out, the doctrine was implicit as far back as the book of Exodus, where God—the God of the living”—calls Himself the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; but it had not won general recognition until the Maccabean age. Thenceforward it was so commonly accepted that one of the standard descriptions of God in the Jewish liturgy became, and remains, “The Raiser of the dead”.

The Sadducees, who denied this doctrine, regarded themselves as the conservative party; they viewed the belief in the resurrection as an innovation. In the Hasmonean age the Sadducees emerge as the party closely associated with the leading priestly families. They probably derived their name from Zadok, whose descendants are commended as faithful priests in Ezek. 44:15. As we learn from Acts 23:8, they disbelieved not only in the resurrection but also in the existence of a spirit-world. Josephus tells us that they were the majority party in the Sanhedrin, but they had to pay attention to the views of the minority party, the Pharisees, because the latter commanded the good will of the people. Under the Roman Empire the Sadducees maintained a pro-Roman policy until the Romano-Jewish War of A.D. 66-70. With the fall of the Temple the Sadducean party disappeared.

The only party to survive the disaster of A.D. 70 was the party of the Pharisees, whose distinctive outlook has characterized the

[p.64]

main stream of Judaism since that time. The Pharisees arose in the time of the Hasmonean ascendancy. They were the people formerly called chasidim, or “pious people”, who lent their support to Judas Maccabaeus and his Hasmonean successors while they fought against Antiochus’s attempt to destroy the Jewish religion. The *chasidim* were satisfied when religious liberty was restored; they disapproved of the Hasmoneans’ political ambition and their assumption of the high priesthood, and withdrew from their alliance with them. It is probably on this account that they became known as Pharisees (Hebrew *perushim*), “separated people”. They were fiercely assailed by some of the Hasmonean rulers, but increased steadily in popular favour. Most of the scribes, or popular teachers of the law, belonged to the Pharisaic party. The law which they taught comprised not only the written law of Moses, but also its interpretative expansions, handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. This oral law was the “tradition of the elders”, denounced by Christ because it nullified the real sense of the divine law which it was intended to explain.

The Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish nation, comprising 71 members is first mentioned in a letter written in 198 B.C. by Antiochus III of Syria to the chief Jewish representatives. Until the attack made by Antiochus IV on the Jewish nation and religion, the Sanhedrin, under the presidency of the high priest, regulated the internal affairs of the Jews. The authority of the Sanhedrin tended to diminish under the autocratic Hasmoneans; but after

the Roman conquest of Palestine it enjoyed considerable freedom in the internal concerns of the Jewish people, not only in Palestine, but even (as the circumstances of Paul’s visit to Damascus show) to some extent in other provinces. We gather from John 18:31 that, while the Sanhedrin could sentence an accused person to death, this sentence could not be executed without the consent of the Roman governor. It was for this reason that the Lord Jesus, having been sentenced to death on a charge of blasphemy (because He confessed Himself to be the Messiah), was then brought before Pilate. Pilate, as the Sanhedrin knew, would not be interested in a charge of blasphemy, and so it was on a charge of seditious activity that our Lord was arraigned before the Roman judge.

Politically and religiously alike, the period between the Testaments is far from representing a standstill, but shows a steady moving forward to the accomplishment of God’s purpose in the redemption wrought out by His Son.

---

© 1949 F.F Bruce. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---