

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTER-TESTAMENTAL PERIOD

We have probably all heard the gibe against much traditional Old Testament exegesis, "It takes all the blessings for the Church and leaves all the curses for the Jews." Proof for this attitude is found most readily in the chapter and page headings of Isa. 40-66 in older editions of the AV. That this attitude used to exist almost universally and is still to be widely found needs no proof. After all, it was the logical outcome of the assumption that the Church is Israel.

Our recognition that many past and present theologians and expositors have been wrong, does not justify our looking on them as fools. They were motivated by more than a blind, logical working out of their assumptions. When we compare the glowing descriptions in Isa. 40-55 with the humble reality in Ezra and Nehemiah, it is natural to ask ourselves whether there is really any link between them. Isa. 43:16-21 compares the return from Babylonia with the Exodus from Egypt and suggests that it will be even greater and more glorious.

From Babylonia there returned about 50,000 together with 7,537 slaves (Ezr. 2:64, 65). The total given in Ezr. 2:2-60 is 29,818, in Neh. 7:6-62 31,089, but both agree in a grand total of 42,360 (Ezr. 2:64, Neh. 7:66); the difference is to be explained by the larger figure including the women. The parallel passage in 1 Esdras 5:41 says, probably correctly, that these were those over twelve years of age. If we allow for the children as well, we reach the round figure suggested above.

A four month journey (cf. Ezr. 7:9) for such a large party was a very difficult undertaking, and it may very well be, as suggested by the internal structure of the list of those who returned, that they came in a number of groups. It was in any case a pitifully small number to restart the history of Israel, and there is no suggestion that they encountered any signal signs of God's favour to encourage them. They returned to a Judea that stretched from Bethel to about Beth-zur, north of Hebron, and from Jericho to the fringe of the coastal plain. Not a vestige of political independence was granted them, and until the time of Nehemiah they apparently formed part of the area under the Persian governor in Samaria, himself subject to the governor or satrap of the province "Beyond the River (Ezr. 5:63)." Their change of status has often been expressed by saying that they went into exile a nation and returned a church.

The purpose of this book is to show, as least in part, why there is such an apparent disparity between Isa. 40-55 and the events of the return and their sequel. It should not be forgotten that even in Isa. 40-48 there are darker passages, e.g. 48:1-5, 17-19, while the promises of 49-55 clearly depend on the

work of the Servant. By the end of the book it may be clearer to the reader why the Servant was recognized by so few when he came, and why, therefore the to us mysterious Inter-Testamental period is of the utmost importance in the working out of God's purposes.

The period covered by this book begins in 538 B.C. and runs on to the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.; this is a considerably longer stretch of time than from the death of Queen Elizabeth I to our own days. During it the prophetic revelation of God ceased, there being only vestiges of it from the time of Malachi to the rise of John the Baptist, and we are almost devoid of accurate knowledge of the history of Judea until about 175 B.C. Even then our knowledge is superficial and partial, as was shown by the excitement caused by the discovery of Qumran and its manuscripts.

One of man's special abilities is to reach into the distant past and picture its events as though they were virtually present. He pays for this by often overlooking the length of time that has elapsed. So we miss the implications of Christ's genealogy in Matt. 1:1-17, viz. that from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to our Lord are comparable periods of time.

While this book must deal with history, for God's purposes and revelation are worked out in history, its real interest is in the development of Judaism during this period and in those factors which prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. That is why it does not go down in detail to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. Those desiring a more purely historical treatment will find it, *inter alia*, in F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations*.