

CHAPTER 2

THE SPIRITUAL EFFECTS OF THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

The three periods into which Matthew divided the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah are not merely three convenient subdivisions. From Abraham to David may fairly be called the period of promise. It is clear from Nathan's words to David in 2 Sam. 7: 10, 11 that God did not consider that His promises of giving the land to Israel had been completely fulfilled till the time of David. Whatever we may think of the Israelite monarchy as an institution, the confirming of the Davidic dynasty was also a confirming of Israel's possession of the land. Throughout the period of the Judges right down to and including Saul we gain the impression that Israel, apart from Divine favour, could have been dispossessed by its neighbours, even though in many cases they were less numerous. Under David, however, Israel could even indulge in the luxury of a civil war without a single one of its neighbours taking advantage of the fact. Indeed Shobi, the brother of Hanun, king of Ammon, whom David had conquered and presumably killed, came to David's aid at the moment it was most needed (2 Sam. 17: 27).

The second period is that of Israel's failure in spite of the fulfilment of God's promises. It is a pity we seldom take the time to read the books of Kings through at a sitting. It would give us a much more realistic picture of the way we pass from the dazzling emptiness of Solomon's glory through the growing weakness caused by civil war until we reach the inevitable grave of the exile. Both kingdoms shared a moment of revived power and glory, the North under Jeroboam II, the South a hundred and fifty years later under Josiah, and with both we discover that the glory was merely the iridescence of the soap bubble.

We are apt to think of the exiles as periods of punishment; once they were finished, return to the old was possible. Indeed the whole British-Israel concept is based on such a return being inevitable. Yet Jeremiah makes it clear that whatever God's mercy might yet do, exile marked a real change in relationship. Speaking of and probably to the ten-tribe Israel of Judah's unwillingness to learn the lesson, he says, "She (Judah) saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce" (Jer. 3: 8).

The Bible is permeated with the concept of completeness. King and people, husband and wife, father and son, mother and daughter, master and servant; none of these pairings are meaningful, if one half or the other is lacking.

It is doubtful whether Biblical Israel ever thought that God's choice of

them was influenced by any merit on their part. They had been chosen and made a people in election love and covenant faithfulness. But with only few exceptions they were convinced that God had chosen them because He needed them. As King He needed Israel as His people, as Husband He needed her as wife, as Father He needed him as son, as Master He needed him as servant. Israel would never have existed but for Jehovah,* but Jehovah was incomprehensible without Israel, at least to the popular mind.

Exile meant that Israel was no longer able to claim to be in covenant relationship with its God and had lost all the privileges that sprang from it, cf. Exod. 19 : 5, 6. It would be more accurate to say that, if it continued to enjoy any of them, it was out of pure grace; they could not be claimed as a right. Ezekiel was clear that when Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin and his fellow-deportees to Babylonia it was an act of God's grace to save them from destruction, but he also stressed that it was a modified act of judgment in which "I have scattered them . . . and have become to them a sanctuary in small measure" (Ezek. 11 : 16).

The separation from the Temple and its subsequent destruction will have influenced those in Babylonia in two ways. For those who had not taken in the prophetic message, and they will have been the majority, the destruction of the Temple will have been the supreme, incredible sign of Jehovah's impotence. They believed that somehow He derived something from the sacrifices, something that He needed, the supreme gain He derived from having a people. In spite of Asaph's words, "Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" (Psa. 50 : 13), many will undoubtedly have thought that God did. Others will have thought that the smoke of the burnt offerings did carry up something real and necessary to Him. Therefore they will have believed that He had been defeated by the gods of the heathen.

For those who had learnt the prophetic lesson there remained another and possibly more agonizing problem. We have insufficient evidence to be able to say much about the individual's piety in his home during the time of the monarchy, how he prayed and worshipped, if indeed he did so privately. It is certain, however, that his public worship was inescapably tied up with sacrifice, whether it was at a local sanctuary or at the temple in Jerusalem. It did not matter whether it was his private sacrifice, or whether he merely associated himself with an offering brought for the community at large, the service centred round the sacrifices which had been brought. Already after Josiah's stringent centralization of sacrificial worship at Jerusalem there must have been searchings of heart among those who lived too far away from the capital to attend regularly. Now in exile all possibility of sacrificial worship had been removed. † Part of the sting in Psa. 137 : 3 is that "the Lord's song" had been part of the setting of the old sacrificial worship.

A living religion can never stand still for long; it is always adapting itself to

* Yahweh is indubitably nearer the original pronunciation of the sacred name, but I have preferred to retain the popular form Jehovah in the few cases where it is needed.

† A few scholars, basing themselves on Ezr. 8 : 17 and the example of the Elephantine temple (cf. p. 23), think there may have been some sacrifice in Babylonia; if so, it has left no mark in Scripture.

changing circumstances. But it can never really go back, however much it looks back. When a modern Christian denomination seeks to put the clock back and copy "the New Testament pattern," the new conformity is merely external; behind it lies an adaptation to new circumstances. Similarly the suggestion that the modern Israeli will rebuild the Temple and re-introduce the Mosaic system of sacrifices breaks down in the face of these facts. That Israel may build some form of building for worship in the *haram es-sherif*, the Temple area, cannot be ruled out as impossible, but the form of worship in it would be recognizable neither to Moses nor Caiaphas. In addition we should note that there is virtually no desire for it among Jewish religious leaders both inside and outside Israel.

In Babylonia the Jews could not go back to the religion of the Patriarchs and bring sacrifices wherever they might find themselves. A few may have done so, but there is no evidence that any such practice was wide-spread. The majority found themselves shut in to a religion without sacrifice but with no indication of a new direction to which to turn. Ezek. 40-48 shows that they could think only in terms of the restoration of the old. The heart-broken and almost hopeless mourning of Psa. 137 probably shows all that was left to most of them religiously. A similar hopelessness among those left in Judea may be found in Lamentations. For those that remained loyal to Jehovah, and most seem to have done so, nothing really remained but trust in the prophetic word of restoration and a looking forward to the renewing of the old.

Modern Old Testament scholarship has tended to look on the time of exile as one of great religious development. There is no evidence for this, and psychologically it is most improbable. The exiles will have been too stunned and too hopeless for that. Equally there is not the slightest evidence that the Synagogue, as it was later called, took its rise in Babylonia at this time, though it may well have done so later. The step from the sanctuary with its sacrifices to the synagogue with its study of the Mosaic law is far greater than we normally grasp.

I believe we shall do better to look on the exile in Babylonia in the same light as the sojourn in Egypt. It was far briefer, but it was long enough for the living links with the past to be broken, and so it provided the womb from which something essentially new could issue. Isaiah was fully justified in comparing the return to Palestine with the Exodus from Egypt, even though on the human level it might seem to be so much humbler.

The Palestine of the Return

The empire of Cyrus stretched from the frontiers of India to the Caucasus, the Aegean Sea, the Mediterranean and the frontier of Egypt. His son Cambyses conquered Egypt. For the first time redemption history* had moved into a wider geographical sphere than the Fertile Crescent.

Outlying provinces might revolt under the weaker of the Persian kings, seldom with much success, but, until the rise of Alexander the Great of Mace-

* This, or salvation history, is a technical term used by many for the history recorded in the Bible, for its purpose is solely to record those matters that have a bearing on the working out of God's redemption.

don, there was no one to challenge the might of Persia. This led to far-reaching results. The last vestiges of political autonomy vanished among the various peoples of the empire. The old city fortifications became a mere memory of past glory and lost all practical value, except perhaps that of holding up some marauding band until the imperial forces could arrive. On the other hand the imperial religion was no longer used as a weak means for keeping the subject peoples loyal. Rather they were encouraged and even commanded to worship their own gods, so that Persia might prosper by their aid.

The Persians left few records behind them, and so it is not likely that we shall ever know for certain when the teaching of Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) became the official religion of Persia. Darius I (521-485 B.C.) was certainly an adherent of it, and a passage like Isa. 45 : 5-7 gains its full meaning only if we assume that Cyrus was also.

Zoroastrianism is a complete and thorough-going dualism in which the great god of good and light with his angels stands opposed to the great god of evil and darkness with his angels. It was very easy and natural for the Persians to assume that the gods of loyal subject nations were among the great angelic helpers of Ahuramazda (Ormuzd), the god of good and light, while those of enemy tribes would be supporters of Ahriman, the spirit of evil. This explains the Persians' spirit of real religious tolerance within their empire. It enabled a Jewish religious community to be re-established with Jerusalem as its centre, and it provided that authoritarian backing without which Ezra's reforms might never have been carried through.

After Sargon, king of Assyria, had captured Samaria, he boasted in his inscriptions that he had built it up more gloriously than before. Things were very different in Judea after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. W. F. Albright expresses it as follows.

"A fair number of towns and fortresses of Judah have now been excavated in whole or in part; many other sites have been carefully examined to determine the approximate date of their last destruction. The results are uniform and conclusive: many towns were destroyed at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. and never again occupied; others were destroyed at that time and partly reoccupied at some later date; still others were destroyed and reoccupied after a long period of abandonment . . . There is not a single known case where a town of Judah proper was continuously occupied through the exilic period" (*Archaeology of Palestine*, revised edit. pp. 141f.).

Whether Nebuchadnezzar intended to send new settlers to Judea after the Assyrian pattern must remain for ever hidden from us. It is clear, however, that he did not send them, and that he did not allow people from the neighbouring territories to come in and occupy the vacant towns and villages. So the land was kept open for the return by the hand of God. Some survivors of those left in the land there must have been (2 Ki. 25 : 12, Jer. 52 : 16), but they were obviously few and insignificant and they play no part in the story of renewal.

Even a fertile land will demand hard work if it has been neglected for almost half a century; how much greater must have been the difficulties in the hills of Judea. There were no economic reasons for the exiles to return, and it is not surprising that many were disheartened when they faced the stern realities.

Particularly annoying for them was that they had no direct access to the king, and that his will was not made known to them directly, but through the deputy governor in the administrative centre of Samaria. He could not directly block the emperor's will, but he could make it very difficult to carry out, and he could normally present the actions of the Jews in the worst possible light.