

## CHAPTER 6

# FROM ZERUBBABEL TO EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

From the completion of the second temple in 516 B.C. to Malachi some time in the first half of the fifth century B.C. virtually complete darkness falls on the history of the Jews. There is merely a gleam of light from the so-called Elephantine Papyri.

The first cataract on the Nile at the modern Aswan (the Syene of Ezek. 29:10; 30:6) was the normal and natural southern frontier of Egypt. There in the Nile there is an island formerly called Yeb, but now Elephantine. About 587 B.C. Pharaoh Psammeticus settled a "Jewish" military colony on this island to guard the frontier against the Ethiopians to the south. It is normally assumed that they were Jews who had entered the land before the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, but Oesterley brings forward a strong argument that they were descendants of Israelite exiles in Mesopotamia who entered Egypt willingly or unwillingly, when Ashur-bani-pal conquered the land in 667 B.C.\* If this is so, they may have called themselves Jews because of the large influx from Judea in Nebuchadnezzar's time, cf. Jer. 44:1, 15.

Be that as it may, finds of papyrus documents on the island, all written in Aramaic, show that they had built themselves a temple, where they worshipped Yahu, i.e. Yahweh or Jehovah. In addition Anath-yahu, Anath-bethel, Eshem-bethel and Cherem-bethel were worshipped. We cannot interpret these names with certainty. It is likely that Bethel, i.e. the House of God, is merely a reverential replacement for Yahu. It is almost certain that we have the ascription of a wife Anath to Yahu, something that formed part of Canaanized Israelite religion throughout its history, cf. Jer. 7:18; 44:17, 25. There may have been as well the worship of a son. There is no reason for thinking that their cultus, which caused much ill-will among their Egyptian neighbours because it involved the sacrifice of bulls, differed in any significant degree from the Mosaic one. It is not surprising that some at any rate in the community were prepared to swear by Egyptian gods in legal matters. Laxity rather than syncretism would lie behind it.

In spite of its irregularities the colony was clearly regarded as Jewish. One of the most interesting of the documents found is an order from the Persian king Darius II, dated in his fifth year, i.e. 410 B.C., concerning the keeping of the feast of Unleavened Bread. Much of it is missing, and it is almost universally assumed that the Passover must have been mentioned as well. For our purposes it is of no importance whether it reached Elephantine through the Persian authorities or the Jewish priestly leaders in Jerusalem. A Jewish official,

\* Oesterley and Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. II, pp. 159-165.

Haniah, was certainly involved. What is important is that this community on the fringe of the Persian empire was known as Jewish and treated as such. The supervision exercised over their worship must have been the same wherever there were Jewish communities. The detailed nature of the instructions helps us to understand how the somewhat earlier activity of Ezra was possible.

We know from other papyri that the temple was destroyed in 410 B.C. by the Egyptians of the neighbourhood. This was probably during the absence of the Persian governor. An appeal to a Persian official whose name has been lost, was unsuccessful. The leaders then wrote to the high priest and his associates in Jerusalem. When this failed they wrote in 408 B.C. to Bagoas, the Persian governor in Jerusalem and sent a similar letter to the sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria. These two letters produced a favourable reply from Bagoas and Delaiah the son of Sanballat, but it is not known whether the temple was ever rebuilt. It may well be that red tape held up matters until Persian power came to an end in Egypt in 404 B.C. All this shows that the inhabitants of Yeb thought themselves proper Jews and took for granted that the Jerusalem priests would rally to their support. It throws much light on the background of Malachi and even more on the greatness of the achievement of Ezra and Nehemiah.

### *Malachi*

Malachi's date must be inferred, partly from his position in the Hebrew canon of the Prophets, partly from the content of his message. The mention of the destruction and devastation of Edom (1 : 3, 4) is no real help, for the date when the Nabatean Arabs drove the Edomites out of their traditional territory cannot be accurately fixed.

There is no doubt at all that he is earlier than Ezra and Nehemiah, though he may very possibly have lived to see their reforms. The general atmosphere of despondency is of a very different type to that found in Haggai. So we shall be fairly safe in placing him only shortly before the activity of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The first sign of despondency was that God's love was doubted (1 : 2). This points to hopes deeply disappointed. Haggai and Zechariah had stirred up Jewish expectations to a very high pitch. Presumably the conditions of drought pictured by the former (1 : 6) had passed—certainly Malachi does not mention them—but the agricultural position had remained poor (3 : 10, 11). Judea was in any case a poor land and off the main trade routes. It had to wait until Hasmonean times to possess the coastal plain through which the main trade route ran. In addition, with Phoenicia and Egypt firmly in Persian hands, most of the trade to and from Egypt was carried by ship instead of crossing the desert between Philistia and Egypt; thus Judea was left in a backwater.

Most painful of all, however, was the complete lack of political freedom. Whether Zerubbabel lost his influence and possibly his life through foolish preparations for rebellion or simply through the steady extension of the Persian policy which allowed full religious autonomy and denied any and every form of political self-determination we shall probably never know. The fact that by

Malachi's time the public representative of the Jews was now the high priest, cf. the appeal to him by the community at Elephantine, underlined the loss of all national as contrasted with religious standing. The return from exile had made the charge that God was powerless, unreal and impossible. So the only explanation the ordinary man could find was that God did not care.

It was this attitude that led to Malachi's second charge, that the priests were offering ritually inadequate and unacceptable animals in sacrifice (1:6-14)—note RSV, NEB "food" (v. 7). There is no suggestion that Malachi was thinking primarily of the priests' own sacrifices. Normally priests tend to be over-careful and particular without any thought or care for the position of the worshipper. But in Malachi's day they were obviously glad to get sacrifices at all. The people, thinking that God had lost interest in them, had lost interest in God. They were only concerned with what they could obtain from God, so they did not see why they should give Him of their best.

This willingness by the priests to accept the second best and ritually inadequate was only one phase of a greater evil. In their capacity as religious teachers the priests were prepared to water down the law (2:1-9). This was done not out of pity for the poor, as was sometimes the case later in the first century A.D. with the Hillelite Pharisees, but to keep the favour of the civil leaders. It had already led to their being despised (2:9). Here again the underlying concept seems to have been that a God who had lost interest in His people was not likely to be concerned with whether His laws were being strictly observed.

Though there is no evidence for a corruption of religion of the type seen at Elephantine, it was certainly knocking at the door. A wave of mixed marriages had begun (2:11). Unless there is a reference to an otherwise unknown marriage of a priest of high standing or of the head of the Davidic house, "the daughter of a foreign god" is a collective, referring to the foreign wives in general. In any case it implies that these women made no pretence of accepting the religion of their husbands; this must be remembered when we come to consider Ezra's and Nehemiah's reactions to the mixed marriages they found already in existence. To make matters worse, in order to be able to take foreign wives they had first divorced their Jewish ones (2:14). Since polygamy was still practised, it shows that the new wives had demanded that they be mistresses in their new homes. So clearly there were political or economic motivations behind these marriages. To divorce the old to please the new was a flagrant breach of Deut. 24:1-4. However we are to interpret "some indecency" (RSV), or "something shameful" (NEB), which the husband found in his wife, it was bound in most cases to have shown itself much earlier in their marriage. These highly placed men, for there is really no reason to think that many of the poorer were involved, for the sake of gain had deliberately thrown overboard the wives they had lived with for years and had married those who were bound to bring religious corruption into the people. Once again, if God did not care, why should they?

Things had gone so far that all benefit from religion was denied (2:17; 3:13-15). Not only had God lost interest in them nationally, but He was not even prepared to be the guardian of public morality. So the old evils of the

monarchy, which had been repeatedly condemned by the prophets, were re-appearing (3 : 5).

Because Malachi is generally handled timelessly in the pulpit, with little or no reference to its background, it is seldom realized how serious the position in Judea had become. If God had not raised up Ezra and Nehemiah, all the lessons of the exile might have been quickly unlearned.

### *The Tragedy of the Walls*

Today there is unanimity among scholars of all shades of opinion that the passage *Ezr.* 4 : 6–23 is an interruption in the story of the rebuilding of the Temple, and that 4 : 24 is the immediate continuation of 4 : 5. 4 : 6 does not mention the Temple and 4 : 7–23 deals specifically with the walls of Jerusalem and not with the Temple. There is nothing surprising in this, for more frequently than is often realized Old Testament writers place material out of strict chronological order so as to prevent the interruption of the main narrative.

For reasons which are never hinted at, still less explained, the Jews began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, although Zechariah in his day had been able to dissuade them (*Zech.* 2 : 1–5). The suggestion made by Stafford Wright\* that the impulse had come from the enthusiasm engendered by Ezra's reform of mixed marriages is one for which there is no vestige of evidence. We must always remember that the attractiveness of a theory is never a proof of its truth. Our historian sees no point in going into detail; his motive is to show the inveterate hatred of the enemies of the Jews and he lets us see it through their own eyes. Quite naturally Rehum, Shimshai and the rest had no interest in the true motives of the builders, even if they were known to them.

It was pointed out in the last chapter that under the Persians fortifications had become virtually unnecessary and were mainly a matter of prestige. In connection with the rebuilding of the Temple we saw that any major building scheme needed the consent of the central authorities; how much more the building or rebuilding of city walls. We need feel no surprise that Artaxerxes put the worst construction on the unauthorized move in Jerusalem.

Ezra tells of two complaints made by the enemies of the Jews during the reign of Artaxerxes I. The former (4 : 7) seems to have been of a general nature and apparently had no special result, except perhaps that it may have made the king suspicious. The latter (4 : 8–16) was much more serious. Rehum was probably governor of Samaria and Shimshai his official second-in-command. This gave weight to their accusations. For all that the royal reply shows that the king's advisers realized that local jealousies were playing a part. That which had been done illegally had to be stopped and, if need be, undone, but the possibility of future permission was held out.

How much time was granted the builders before the royal answer came we do not know, but it will hardly have been less than six months. Recent excavations by Miss Kenyon have shown how thorough had been the destruction caused by Nebuchadnezzar's troops. If Nehemiah was later to complete his work in fifty-two days (*Neh.* 6 : 15), it can only mean that much of his task was

\* J. Stafford Wright, *The Date of Ezra's Coming to Jerusalem?* (1958).

repair rather than rebuilding from ground level. There could have been no question of repairing the shambles left by the Babylonians; in some places Nehemiah's wall even followed another line than that of the Jebusite and Davidic wall. So it is a reasonable conclusion that Nehemiah and Jerusalem owed more to this apparent failure than is generally recognized.

We are told that the Samaritans made them cease "by force and power" (4:23), i.e. by armed force. They pretended that the city had to be captured by force of arms, and in so doing they created as much damage as they could. But once it was captured, they had to desist, for the royal decree did not cover a pulling down of what had gone up. So Nehemiah found much done to help him, when the time came.

Had the inhabitants of Judea had sufficient trust in God to accept Zechariah's vision of an unfortified city, the history of the Jews and of Jerusalem would have been very different, but this was too much to expect of those to whom Malachi's message had come. We have to bear testimony, however, to them that having chosen the second best they played their part well.