

CHAPTER 9

THE JEWS IN THE PERSIAN DISPERSION

In view of the very little information we have about Judea under Persian rule, it is entirely to be expected that we should know even less about those Jews that remained in Babylonia and surrounding districts or had found their way to other lands. Archaeology, which has thrown so much light on some other periods, has almost nothing to tell us here, though, as we saw in ch. 6, it has lifted the veil on a fascinating and completely unexpected Jewish community in Upper Egypt.

In Babylonia and the neighbouring countries it has revealed little more than that the Jewish Murashu family were able to set up as bankers on a considerable scale, and that the background of the book of Esther is accurate. It has nothing, however, to tell us that would throw more light on the story itself or the problems it raises. We cannot even identify the King Ahasuerus of the book of Esther with certainty. Usually he is taken to be Xerxes (486–465 B.C.), but there are a few front-rank archaeologists who prefer to think of Artaxerxes II (404–359 B.C.). The former gives us a satisfactory explanation of the time gap between Est. 1 : 3 and 2 : 16, for this would be the period when Xerxes was engaged in his disastrous campaign against Greece, which ended with the defeats at Salamis and Plataea. The latter removes the difficulties raised by Herodotus' mention of Xerxes' queen Amestris who cannot be identified with either Vashti or Esther, but does not explain the already mentioned time lapse. Since very little in the interpretation of the story depends on the identification of the monarch, he will simply be called by his Biblical name.

The evidence of archaeology is that the book gives an accurate background picture of the Persian court, a picture that could hardly have been obtainable by a story teller in the later Greek period. This has convinced most scholars that the late date once generally attributed to it cannot be defended. The best evidence that it is not the work of a pious inventor is given by the additions it received in the Greek translation, which may be found in the Apocrypha; these supply some of that religious element so obviously lacking in the Hebrew. The fact of these additions suggests, however, that the book was late in being taken into the canon. Though its canonicity seems not to have been discussed at the rabbinic council at Yavneh or Jamnia, there is adequate evidence that in later Talmudic times there were misgivings about certain aspects of the book. This may also explain why it, alone of all the canonical books, has not been found among the Qumran texts and fragments.

We do not know when the celebration of Purim began in Palestine. The New Testament does not mention it, at any rate by name, and there are few

details in the earlier Talmudic writings—there are only about seven mentions of it in the Mishnah. Even Edersheim in his books about the Temple and Judaism in the time of Christ has few details to offer us. At the same time it was universally observed in the first century of our era. Josephus (*Ant.* XI, vi, 13) can say, “Whence it is, that even now all the Jews that are in the habitable earth keep these days festival”. 2 Macc. 15 : 36 shows us that it was known in Egypt, and so indubitably in Palestine, by 50 B.C. We may perhaps deduce from its non-mention in the similar passage in 1 Macc. 7 : 49, which is normally dated some fifty years earlier, that the feast was not observed in Palestine at that time.

Mordecai and Esther

The story of Esther is throughout linked with Susa, or Shushan. This had been the capital of Elam; it was captured by the rising power of the Medo-Persian empire and became one of the three Persian royal cities, along with Ecbatana and Persepolis. Archaeology suggests that it was divided in two by the river Choaspes, the part on the left bank being the royal quarter, called in the Hebrew “the citadel”; this rendering is followed by Moffatt and JB. AV, RV “the palace” is too narrow, RSV, NEB “the capital” too wide, for in 3 : 15; 8 : 15 it seems to be distinguished from Susa the city. Possibly “royal quarter” would give the sense best. There was a considerable Jewish population in Susa, which was quite natural, as it was the nearest of the three Persian capitals to the area in which the Judean exiles had been settled.

There is no warrant for Josephus’ claim that Mordecai was living in Babylon at the time when the story opens, and that he moved to Susa when Esther was taken into the royal harem. The statement that he “was sitting at the king’s gate” (2 : 19, 21) can mean only that he was a court official, which is recognized explicitly by the apocryphal addition. The fact that he had to pass on his knowledge of the plot against the king’s life through the queen (2 : 22) shows that his post was a relatively minor one.

We have every reason for thinking that Mordecai was a typical example of the aptitude shown by many Jews right down the long centuries of exile to make themselves at home in their alien surroundings, when they have been friendly. In private he was doubtless a practising Jew—if Ahasuerus was Xerxes, then Mordecai lived before Ezra and the increased demands of the Law introduced by him—but his antecedents were unknown among the multi-national multitude that filled the minor court appointments. Since Zoroastrianism, the court religion, was not idolatrous and could be construed as monotheistic, there was no need for him to make a religious stand. His name Mordecai was doubtless derived from Marduk, the chief god of Babylon. Since it was from his father Jair that he received it (2 : 5), he was evidently brought up in a spirit of adaptation—we need not go so far as to call it assimilation. There is no need, as do so many sceptics, to make Kish in his genealogy (2 : 5) not his great-grandfather but King Saul’s father, and so to suggest that the story states that Mordecai himself had been deported from Jerusalem, which would have made him well over a hundred years old. The names of Kish and Saul must have been treasured and frequently used in the tribe of Benjamin, witness the

great apostle to the Gentiles, who at home and among his own people was known as Saul. Lest we are tempted to read too much into Mordecai's name, let us remember that it was borne also by one of the more important persons who returned with Zerubbabel (Ezr. 2: 2).*

Whenever the Jew has been allowed free contacts with his surroundings, it has been fairly common for him to have two names, one Hebrew, one derived from his environment. We need look no further than "Saul, who is also called Paul". So Mordecai's niece Hadassah was known to her Gentile neighbours as Esther, which is derived from Ishtar, the most important of the Mesopotamian goddesses, the ruler of the planet Venus. Such a view is obviously displeasing to the average orthodox Jew, as may be seen in Rabbi M. Turetsky's suggesting that the name Esther may have been given her at her coronation (were Persian queens crowned?). The additional statement, "all scholars agree, however, that the name Esther is almost certainly derived from the Persian *stara*, star", might have been reasonably true half a century and more ago, but hardly today.†

We do not know who wrote this book. In default of further information Jewish tradition suggests Mordecai himself. The time, however, had not yet come when prime ministers wrote their memoirs. In addition, when Mordecai grew too old for his task or was supplanted by a new favourite, his downfall was probably as complete, though less dramatic, as Haman's. We shall probably be correct in assuming that he hired a professional writer to do the task. His touch may be seen in the element of exaggeration we constantly meet in everything to do with the Oriental ruler; perhaps it would be better to say that things are seen rather larger than life. If we remember this, we shall be able to see much in clearer perspective.

When we read the advice of Ahasuerus' courtiers, "Let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the palace" (2: 3), we need not take it any more literally than would the king. Quite apart from the fact that even a Xerxes would not have wantonly stirred up trouble throughout his empire, shaken by the disasters in Greece, by foolishly infringing the privacy of the women's quarters everywhere, he was not a sexual maniac. We are involved in enormity, if we imagine royal officers in the provinces from the Punjab to the first cataract on the Nile, and to Macedonia and the Caspian, picking out every girl of marriageable age who showed an exceptional degree of beauty and dispatching her to Susa. In addition, this was not an exercise to fill the royal harem but to find a new queen. Persian tradition was that the queen should be from a noble Iranian family. Ahasuerus might ignore the strict demands of tradition, but that does not mean that the new queen might be a lowly commoner picked up from the gutter, as the legend pictures King Cophetua doing with his beggar maid. There will, at the very least, have been a tacit understanding that

* An article by Rabbi Prof. L. L. Rabinowitz in *The Jerusalem Post* (7.3.74) agrees with the general position taken up above, but suggests that "sitting in the king's gate" (2: 19, 21) meant that he was a judge in the supreme court. This is possible but hardly borne out by the detail in the story.

† In an article in *Jewish Chronicle* (London) of 8.3.74.

beauty was confined to the higher ranks of society.

Here we find the most probable explanation why Mordecai had told his niece not to reveal that she was a Jewess (2:10). That she was considered to be Mordecai's daughter the story presupposes, but it was not known at the time that he was a Jew. There is no vestige of evidence for any anti-Jewish sentiment at the Persian court, but for all that the Jews were a doubly subject race, conquered by the conquered Babylonians. With their Babylonian names uncle and niece were presumably taken to belong to some old Babylonian family.

Jewish sentiment was later shocked by the thought that Mordecai could have handed his adopted daughter over to a heathen marriage at best, or if the gamble did not come off, to an existence of opulent non-existence in a heathen harem (2:14). So tradition invented the idea that Mordecai had hidden her, but that he had been forced to bow to the king's command and hand her over.

The rabbis were also offended by the thought that the salvation of the Jews at that time depended to such an extent on the physical beauty of a young woman. Rabbi M. Turetsky, quoted above, states that there are five opinions in the classical Jewish sources about her age at the time. Four of them make her seventy or older. "She captivated all by an inner moral beauty of a magnetic type which attracted her beholders from king to eunuch." In fact she must have been thirteen or fourteen, and we should remember this when we think of her fears, her courage and her wisdom.

Haman the Agagite

Already Josephus (*Ant.* XI. vi. 5) gives us the haggadic interpretation, later found in the Targum, that Haman was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king (1 Sam. 15:8, 32, 33). So it is suggested that we have here, so to speak, the second round between one linked with Saul and a descendant of the last of the Amalekite kings. There is nothing to commend the idea.

The names Hammedatha (Haman's father), Haman, and those of Haman's ten sons (9:7-9) are all good Persian ones, and there is nothing in Agagite that is necessarily not Persian. No suggestion is made that Haman had any objection to the Jews as such; indeed, it is made clear, that if they were to share Mordecai's fate, it was merely to be to the greater glory of the king's favourite (3:6). Even more important is that the author does not leave overmuch to our imagination. Had he meant the haggadic interpretation he would have made it clear, which it is not. In the LXX translation Agagite appears as "the Bugaeon". Whether or not we are to understand this as Braggart we cannot now say, but it does show that the later haggadic interpretation was not yet in circulation.

In essence there is nothing out of the ordinary in Haman's character and actions. He is one of the types thrown up by a dictatorship that makes no effort to hide its absolute power. He reminds me of Goering, who in many ways outshone his master Hitler and behaved as though he was the real power in the land. Yet, when it came to a crisis, he was crushed as easily as was Haman.

The position of grand vizier, if we may use a later term, under the Persian monarchs was one of immense power and of equally great danger. Ambitious

men might close their minds to the fact that the same whim that raised them to power could and probably would cast them down in ruin. For all that they could not shut their unconscious minds to the threat, and the pressure of constant threat produced men like Haman.

No indication is given why Mordecai refused to prostrate himself before Haman; a court position implied prostration before the king and any on whom the king chose to bestow signal honour. Any suggestion must remain conjecture, but the reason may be suggested by "after these things" (3:1), with which the story of Haman begins. Though Mordecai's adopted daughter was queen and he had saved the king's life, no reward or advancement had come his way. Now he saw this worthless braggart promoted without reason or merit. It seems likely that he was suddenly overcome by a sense of the vanity and futility of his manner of life. This in turn awoke the realization that the only real value in his life was that he belonged to the people of God, as is shown by his open confession to his fellow-officials that he was a Jew (3:4).

When we read of the reaction of Haman's pride, we are confirmed in our belief that both Satan's and man's root sin was pride, the belief that one can control the issues of life and death not merely for oneself but also for others. Haman knew that it was a simple matter to crush Mordecai, cf. 5:11-14, and its very simplicity he felt as a personal insult.

It is quite characteristic of pride that it should be combined with a high degree of superstition (3:7). Pride does not bow to God, but it has an irrational fear of the blind forces of the universe; let the day but be propitious, and Haman was prepared to let the plan of revenge be known almost a year in advance. So confident was Haman that he discounted both the possibilities of flight and self-defence. The story-teller sums up the callousness of unbridled power, when he pictures Ahasuerus and Haman carousing, while even the predominantly Gentile Susa feels dismay (3:15).

The Collapse of the Plot

Mordecai was a proud man as well as Haman, and he too had to pay the price of pride; his pride as a Jew had been even more fatal than his place-seeking. In the skilful, objective account no mention is made of his religious reaction, but in fact there are no grounds for thinking that there was much disparity between his private reaction and his public expression of it. He was one of those successful men for whom religion is more a background than a daily reality. When disaster stared him in the face, there was no panic throwing of himself into religion. We can hear confidence in, "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place" (4:14)—like many a politician today, who cannot get beyond Providence, Mordecai had forgotten how to talk about God—but it is confidence in the security of Israel, not of the individual. His attitude is largely, "God helps those who help themselves".

From the moment Queen Esther is prepared to sacrifice herself all the elements of the story begin to combine smoothly. Ahasuerus realized that his wife must have had a major request, if she was willing to risk her life for it; it had to

be more than the pleasure of his presence at a banquet. The mention of Haman suggested to the king that he must be involved in the granting of the still unspoken request; in fact it was to prevent his becoming suspicious. While the postponement of the request (5 : 8) will have heightened the king's curiosity, it will hardly have been due to skilful stage-management on Esther's part. Rather the Holy Spirit caused a sudden spasm of fear, which gave Him added time to work, so that when Haman's star was eclipsed, Mordecai's was able to shine out in full splendour.

With the fall and death of Haman the peril for the Jews had passed, but Esther, doubtless on Mordecai's advice, decided to make doubly sure. The decree, thanks to the Persians' stress on the immutability of the king's commands, could not be revoked, but it could be effectively neutralized. When the people of the Queen and Grand Vizier were allowed to defend themselves (8 : 11), we may be sure that the authorities knew very well on which side their bread was buttered.

The effect was immediate. "Many . . . declared themselves Jews" (8 : 17)—the RV rendering "became Jews" does not do justice to the Hebrew—though their adherence probably lasted in most cases for just as long as Mordecai was Grand Vizier. In addition, when the day of reckoning came, there were eight hundred victims of Jewish revenge in Susa, including Haman's ten sons; there were seventy-five thousand elsewhere in the Persian empire.

Our distaste, to put it no more strongly, for such a bloody revenge normally keeps us from examining the figures more closely. Eight hundred in Susa was a high figure for a city where there was no very big Jewish population. In proportion, the other figure is low and could easily represent Jewish vengeance in the province of Babylon alone.

One of the reasons why the truth of this book has been so widely questioned by scholars is that, apart from the Feast of Purim, its events seem to have left no mark on records anywhere. When the leaders of the Jewish community at Yeb, cf. p. 23, wrote to the high priest in Jerusalem and later to Bagoas, the Persian governor of Judea, and the two sons of Sanballat, they did not mention in their summary of events that it was not so long that the very existence of the community had been threatened. Equally, in the enumeration of opposition in *Ezr.* 4 : 6–23, Haman's decree is not even hinted at. All the trouble begins with the Jews' neighbours, who try to influence the Persian court. We can only infer that Haman's decree was never promulgated in the satrapies Beyond-the-River and Egypt. A satrap had almost boundless power, and he would have to decide how to handle something obviously expressing the king's passing whim. In some satrapies there were no Jews. In others, like Beyond-the-River, an attempt to carry out the decree could well have resulted in a general explosion, so probably both the original order and then the permission for the Jews to defend themselves quietly vanished without trace in the provincial archives.

This would explain why the feast of Purim and the book of Esther seem to be relatively late arrivals on the Palestinian scene. If this is so, the only real argument against the historicity of the story seems to disappear.

Without a Jewish queen and grand vizier there might well have never been a

Nehemiah and Ezra, but it is the latter who are of real importance for the history of the Jews and the development of Judaism.

The Book of Tobit

The Book of Tobit is a charming piece of fiction comparatively well known because of its place in the Apocrypha. It claims to describe some of the experiences of Tobit, a pious member of the tribe of Naphtali, who had been deported by the Assyrians, and of his son Tobias. Though its fictional nature has been long recognized, except by some Roman Catholic scholars, it has been valued for the picture it gives of the ideals of the pious in the Eastern dispersion. Though with the exception of some Aramaic MSS it was preserved only in Greek—the Latin and Syriac are translations from the Greek—it was generally accepted that behind it lay a Hebrew original. Parts of this have now been found at Qumran.

Formerly, on internal evidence, most scholars had dated it about 200 B.C. In 1966, however, Albright was able to state with confidence, on the strength of the Hebrew used in the fragments discovered at Qumran, "We can date such books as Esther and Tobit in the late Persian period . . ."*

This means we can gain some impression of the religious life of the pious in the East at the time. Though Tobit's heart obviously goes out to the temple in Jerusalem, there is no suggestion of an attempt to attend its services. Obviously the pilgrimages, which were such a feature of a later age, had not yet begun. There is also no suggestion of the existence of the Synagogue, which is all too often taken for granted as a product of the exile from the first.

Tobit takes the authority of the Torah and of the Prophets for granted; there are considerable echoes of the Psalms, Proverbs and Job. There are also indications of a growing oral tradition. Prayer in time of need recurs whenever it is needed, but there is no suggestion of regular daily prayer. Charity to the needy and sexual purity are stressed. All this adds up to a picture of rudimentary Judaism, and it probably shows the kind of influence that Ezra's reform made on the pious, especially those separated from the Temple and its ritual.

* D. N. Freedman & J. C. Greenfield (editors), *New Directions in Biblical Archaeology* (Doubleday), p. 15.