

Rock-fall and Moraine

- Exile, Diaspora, return and rebuilding

CHANGING ERAS

Fall of Babylon

At the death of Nebuchadnezzar (562 BC) his empire began to crumble. There was a power struggle out of which Nabonidas emerged as ruler. He came to power at a difficult time and in an attempt to strengthen the empire he made changes, which caused considerable discontent in Babylon. He moved his administrative centre to the Arabian oasis of Tema, installed his son Belshazzar as viceroy in Babylon, and began to neglect the worship of Marduk in favour of the moon god Sin. This added to his absence from the vital New Year festival fuelled resentment against him.

Rise of Persia

The clouds, however, were on the horizon, not only within the empire but also beyond. In 550 BC the Medes and the Persians met in decisive conflict and Cyrus the Persian ruler emerged the victor; someone with outstanding qualities both as a military commander and as a statesman. In fact the Medes and the Persians became a dual monarchy standing in awesome power before Nabonidas and the declining power of the Babylonians shot through with discontent. Finally, in 539 BC, Cyrus conquered Babylon and as had been the case throughout the empire, he was welcomed as a liberator. The ascendance of Cyrus inaugurates a whole new era in the history of the ancient world.

VOICE OF THE PROPHETS

'Daniel'

The book of Daniel is hugely problematic. The first half of the book (Ch 1-6) appears to be woven around the story of a Jew in exile in Babylon from 605 BC. The second half of the book (Ch 7-12) are made up of apocalyptic visions that relate to the Maccabean crisis around 169 BC with the Greek ruler Antiochus 1V ('Epiphanes'). Most scholars do not see the book as having any connection with the Babylonian and Persian period at all. In fact many would say the stories in the first half are just pious myths. We will look at these stories as though they fitted into the 'Exile' period and then return to the text at the time when the Jewish struggle with Hellenism reaches its climax.

In any context the ministry of Daniel is unique. Not least is the fact that his story alone spans a period from 605 BC when Nebuchadnezzar, having defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish (after the fall of Assyria) took a few high born Jewish children as hostages to Babylon (Daniel would have been about 14 years old at the time), up until Cyrus's establishment of the Persian empire in the place of the Babylonians; (Daniel would have been a white-haired old man of over 80 years old when he stood in the lion pit).

Daniel did not have the standing of a prophet, he was a statesman; a wise man anointed by God. He did not have the first of his visions until he was about 65 years old; these were fearful experiences for him and their content would have remained largely unintelligible until long after his death, late into the era of Greek dominion. Daniel is much more akin to the patriarch Joseph than the typical Hebrew prophet.



For all the problems that the book of Daniel presents us (and they are legion as we have indicated above), two themes come clearly through:

- The challenge of the uncompromising godliness of the lives of Daniel and his friends; their fearlessness stands as a testimony to the unbelievers around them; Daniel's wisdom and understanding clearly have their source in God
- The challenge that Yahweh, the only true God is in control of history, judging evil and establishing his rule and purposes; this message comes in the visions that make up the second half of the book and complement the more personal message of the first half

Isaiah 40 - 55

The Judean exiles enjoyed tolerable conditions of captivity in this 'foreign land' to which God had allowed them to be taken, but their faith was being shaken to its roots. Israel had been torn up from her history and foundations and left in wreckage, all around her there was the rise and fall of world powers reshaping the existing structures. The Hebrew mind must have been tormented by questions: 'Has God abandoned his people?' 'Can God still help his people?', 'Has Yahweh been conquered by the gods of these great empires?', 'Can insignificant Judah and Jerusalem really centre in his purposes?'. Against this background and into this situation the oracles of Isaiah 40 -55 speak.

These words occupy a unique place within the history of prophecy. Here we stand upon one of the mountain peaks; the horizons are vaster, the air is purer, the details of every day living are less defined, whole vistas of landscape are taken in at a glance, and yet paradoxically some of the most sensitive, profoundly personal and moving revelations of God's salvation purposes are also presented here. The themes of the oracles are clear:

- God is the creator and controller of the universe: 'To the Lord the nations are nothing, no more than a drop of water, the distant islands are as light as dust' (40:15)
- Israel are God's chosen people. 'I have redeemed you, I have called you by my name, you are mine'
- God is shaping the times according to his purpose; Cyrus himself is God's servant, 'The Lord has chosen Cyrus to be king ... appointed him to conquer nations' (45:1)
- God's servant is coming out of Israel, but while not Israel will be raised up to accomplish God's purpose. Unlike Cyrus the servant will move quietly and obscurely, obedient to God even through unjust punishment and violent death; his action will bring about knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins for all nations. 'My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased, will bear the punishment of many and for his sake I will forgive them' (53:11)

ARISE AND BUILD

The Cyrus edict

In 538 Cyrus issued a decree (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5), which authorised Jewish exiles who wished to return to Judah the right to do so, and provided for the rebuilding of the Temple.

Return

Leadership of the 'return party' was given to Sheshbazzar (younger son of Jehoiachin). Among this group, or leading another that followed soon after, was Zerubbabel (probably son of Jehoiachin's eldest son Shealtiel). The relationship between the works of these two



is difficult (Has the Chronicler telescoped them?), between them they reintroduced sacrificial worship on the temple site in Jerusalem and laid the foundations for a new temple.

Day of small things

So many obstacles and discouragements stood in the way of this little Judean community that work on rebuilding the Temple ceased¹, and for 15 years nothing more was done about it. The returnees built their own houses, cultivated fields, but a succession of droughts and poor harvests brought further dejection.

In the meantime the Persian Empire had extended its territory even more. But with the death of Cyrus in 530 BC, and his son Cambyses in 525 BC, returning from the conquest of Egypt, the empire fell into civil war. Out of this emerged, not chaos, but a strong and able ruler, Darius I. He brought the empire under masterful control and established a unique counter checking system of administration.

Rebuilding the Temple

Early in Darius's reign the ministry of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who encouraged them to resume the work of rebuilding the Temple, stirred the Judean community.

They both said that completing the Temple was a necessary precondition to receiving the full outpouring of God's blessing on the nation. Recent disorder in the Persian empire was a sign that God was at work, bad harvests would give place to rain and prosperity - but they must put God's interests first.

Both Zerubbabel prince of the house of David and Jeshua the first priest of Zadok's line in the restored Temple, figure largely in the prophecies. There was the promise of God's continued purpose in the kingship and the priesthood. In response to these prophecies these two men took the lead in resuming the rebuilding of the Temple.

Immediately there was opposition. Probably the Samaritans, resenting the rejection of their early attempts to join in the worship of the new community, reported the activity to the local Persian governor hoping it would be prohibited. The result of the investigation into the legality of the Judean activity was that Cyrus's original edict was uncovered and full assistance was given to aid them in completing the work. This was clearly a sign of God's favour on them and the Temple was complete and dedicated on 12th March 515 BC.

Although it appeared a poor structure in comparison with the Temple of Solomon that had been destroyed by the Babylonians, the prophets assured them that the new Temple would be filled with far greater glory than Solomon's. The truth of course lay in God's greater purposes into the future.

Frustration and hostility

After the dedication of the Temple Zerubbabel is no longer mentioned in the biblical records. Many believe that the kingly aspirations given by the prophets were acted on

¹ Probably government finance was not forthcoming and the Samaritans used bureaucracy to frustrate them.

presumptuously and he was removed by Persian power; we don't know. God's timing had to be waited for, and it was not yet.

Darius had shown his good will to the Jews, but beyond rebuilding the Temple they could do little more during his reign. No doubt whenever the Samaritans found an opportunity to cause trouble for the Jews they did so and when Darius's son, Xerxes, came to the throne in 486 a charge (details not given) was made by them against the Jews (Ezra 4:6). This was the king with whom the story of Esther is concerned; again hostility towards the Jews is the theme.

In the reign of the next king, Artaxerxes I, Samaritan complaint against the Judeans continued. This time the issue was serious; an attempt to rebuild the walls of the city, which without royal permission would be viewed as an act of sedition and even rebellion. The king's decree was for the work to stop. The Samaritans enjoyed enforcing the edict and even destroyed that much of the wall as had already been built. We can understand the response of Artaxerxes because he spent the first six years of his reign quelling a nationalist revolt in Egypt.

Reaffirming God's love

The situation must have brought low morale in the Jewish community. The promises of Haggai and Zechariah had appeared to come to nothing; attempts to rebuild the walls had been squashed. There is every indication that social evils of various sorts began to plague the community. Into this atmosphere came the voice of the anonymous prophet whose work is compiled under the name 'Malachi' ('my messenger'). It is his concern to prove that God does love them, he has chosen them, but it is their sins that prevent them from enjoying blessing in the present. There will be judgment, but at the Day of the Lord there will be protection for those who love God.

Rebuilding walls

This is the background to the events in the 20th year of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah, a Jew, is the cupbearer to the king and he receives news of the 'trouble and shame' the Judean community are in. He is grief stricken which provokes questions from the King. His honest reply results in his being given authority to rebuild the walls and act as governor in the area. In the face of intrigue and hostility Nehemiah built the walls of Jerusalem in an astonishing 52 days, completing it amid great rejoicing and thanksgiving.

Rebuilding community

Probably at the instigation of Nehemiah (but no details are given), another official is sent from the Persian court to Judah. The governor Nehemiah realises that the social problems will only be solved when Jewish covenant law regulated the life of the community. Ezra 'scribe of the law of the God of heaven' [equivalent to 'secretary of state for Jewish affairs'] arrives on the scene. His mission reaches its climax at a public reading of the law in Jerusalem at the end of which they bound themselves in solemn oath to live by it.

We see the importance that the study of the written law had received during the exile; from now on it would be characteristic of the Jewish community wherever it might be scattered. So the combined ministry of Nehemiah and Ezra established the community on the basis



of scripture ('Book of the Law') being God's way for living. They left their stamp on the community that remains to this day.

Visions of judgment

It is very likely that it was at this time that the prophetic voice of Joel was heard. This timeless little book speaks with the most powerful language about God's final acts of judgment. Using the imagery of a plague of locusts he envisages a host gathering for the end time battle. It is also a time of the outpouring of the Spirit upon young and old, and a river will flow from the Temple which will water the Dead Sea valley. It is not impossible that it is with these words that the prophetic voice of the Hebrew Scriptures falls into silence.

JEWS AND THE PERSIANS

Scattered and settled

With the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC Jews were not only taken to Babylon as exiles but scattered as refugees in all directions throughout the ancient near east. They were found in trans-Jordan and Arabia, and large numbers escaped to Egypt. During the 200 years of Persian rule the Jews settled in their new environments and put down roots, the 'Diaspora' (or 'Dispersion') became established. A phenomenon, which was to have a dramatic influence upon the Jewish faith and remains right up to the present day.

As a result of discovering papyrus manuscripts we know a quite a lot about some Jews who settled in upper Egypt at Elephantine where they built a temple similar to the one that had stood in Jerusalem. Here they carried on the sacrificial ritual to the worship of Yahweh, though it was somewhat corrupted by Canaanite elements.

Wherever Jews settled they found a significant place within the community. They exploited the opportunities for business and trade. Their life style and distinctive religious practices marked them out. While on occasions they faced bitter hostility, they were also able to reach positions like civil governor, as was the case with individuals like Zerubbabel and Nehemiah.

Persian influence

While the Jews fought to preserve the distinctiveness of their faith the Persian environment around them did have an influence on their faith and culture:

- Persians were Zoroastrians. A dualistic faith that saw a cosmic conflict between the forces of light and darkness, good and evil. The Persians worshipped Ahura Mazda ('wise lord') the god of light, who with his six Amesha Spentas (holy immortal angels), fought against Angra Mainyu ('the hostile spirit') and his Daevas (evil spirits). This 'angelology' influenced Jewish apocalyptic writing and stimulated interest in the references and work in biblical angels and the whole subject of eschatology.
- Aramaic was the language of the Persian Empire and replaced Hebrew as the *lingua franca*. Its distinctive 'square' characters, characteristic of Hebrew writing, replaced the angular Phoenician script, which had been used previously.
- Aramaic became more widely spoken and there was need to interpret (Heb *targum*) the scriptures so that they could be understood. These *targums* existed mainly in oral form for several centuries, explaining the text. Some believe this is what is to be understood



when Ezra's law-book was read with an interpretation to enable the people to understand (cf. Neh 8:8).

People of the book

One of the most important developments during this era was the emphasis that grew concerning the study of the Torah. With the Temple in ruins and sacrifice no longer possible all that remained as a visible central focus to the faith of the exiles was the Law and its commands. The Jews also knew that the destruction of judgment had come because they had failed to obey God's commands. Even after the Return, the rebuilding of the Temple and the recommencing of sacrifice, the reading and study of the Torah was paramount. Judaism, as it is understood today was being born.

In Babylon, and then in Judea and throughout the Diaspora, people who gave themselves to the study of the Torah would gather the community together to study and explain the Law. They became known as the scribes and their gatherings were the beginnings of the synagogue (Gk lit. 'gathering place'). The parent figure of this movement was Ezra, who in Jewish tradition is often seen as a second Moses. The way he takes the Torah and shapes the community with it, applying it to everyday life, is the perfect illustration of the work of the scribe (cf Ez 7:10; Nh 8:8).

The 'Sopherim' (scribes and rabbis) continued the work of Ezra, teaching and interpreting the Torah. Their work produced the 'oral law', which came to have enormous authority for succeeding generations. The work of the scribes produced a 'running commentary' on the biblical text called a *midrash* ('exegesis' from the Heb. *drash* meaning 'interpretation'). A *midrash* either emphasised clear truth or constructed rules ('putting a fence around the law'). Increasingly then for the Jews:

- The sacrifice gave way to the Torah
- The priest gives way to the rabbi²
- The Temple gives way to the synagogue

However in Judea the prestige of the High Priest also grew; not simply as the head of Temple ritual, but because control of internal affairs in the Jewish province increasingly fell into his grasp. It became more and more a temple-state.

Questions

1. The collapse of Babylon and the rise of Persia is a totally new era in history, how did this affect the Jews? We live in a time of dramatic global change; are there any lessons we can learn from the biblical account of the Jewish experience?
2. Isaiah chapters 40-55 have had a powerful influence on Christian thinking, how would you describe the nature of this influence?
3. What role did prophets play in the return and the restoration of the Jews to Judaea?

² Jews with the name 'Cohen [priest] still have special responsibilities in the synagogue on high days and holy days.

Reading and Resources

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