

EXILE AND RETURN

SHIMON BAKON

Jewish history does not easily fit into neat categories established by philosophers of history. They could explain the disappearance of the mighty empires and a host of minor kingdoms of antiquity. But the unwavering perseverance of Jews and their faith, against all odds, throughout more than 3,500 years, is for these historians an enigma. Ten tribes, the bulk of the children of Israel, forced into exile with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria in 722, got lost among the nations. The two tribes of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, that met a similar disaster at the hands of Babylonia, maintained their identity in exile. How do we account for this puzzling fact?

Equally perplexing, almost bordering on the miraculous, was the response of the Judean exiles to Cyrus' Proclamation (539 BCE), that allowed peoples in exile to return to their homelands. The Bible records the astonishing number of over 40,000 exiles who heeded the call and returned. By contrast, let us see what Ephraim Stern, professor of Palestinian archeology at The Hebrew University, writes about the Philistines, who were also exiled by the Babylonian invader, as were the Judeans: "They were destroyed and exiled; they never returned . . . From that point on, there were no more Philistines."¹

This article will focus on fewer than 300 of the 3,500 years of Jewish history, the period from 722 to 444 BCE, and the reformation effected by Ezra-Nehemiah in a demoralized Judea. These fateful years hold the secret of Jewish history, setting a pattern for the following 2,500 years up to this day. An attempt will be made partially to unravel the mystery and vitality of creative Jewish survival: Whence came the strength to meet the many challenges, overcome crisis after crisis, and ultimately, like the legendary phoenix, rise from the ashes after being consumed by the fire of the Holocaust, and effect the second Return after a 2,000 year exile?

TWO CONTRASTING EXILES

*By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea we wept,
When we remembered Zion (Ps. 137:1).*

Shimon Bakon, Ph.D., is the editor of The Jewish Bible Quarterly.

In the year 722 BCE, the King of Assyria conquered Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and exiled its inhabitants. Known as the "ten lost tribes," they vanished and were lost to Israel as a coherent national or religious entity.

(There are traces of them to this day. A notable example is the Pashtun, a powerful tribe in Afghanistan, that uses Hebrew names, and circumcises their boys at the age of eight days. They are fanatical Muslims, hating Jews and Israel, but the women light candles and bake challah for the Muslim sabbath.)

In the year 598 BCE, 124 years after the catastrophic event in Samaria, Babylonia, that had superseded Assyria as the dominant empire of the Middle East, laid siege to Jerusalem. The King of Judah, Jehoiachin, surrendered. He was deported to Babylonia, and so were 10,000 notables of Judah, the prophet Ezekiel among them. Zedekiah, an uncle of the deposed Jehoiachin, was appointed in his place. The young and inexperienced King rebelled, disregarding the warnings of Jeremiah. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar moved against Jerusalem, captured Zedekiah, executed his sons while he watched, and then blinded him. On the black-letter day of the Ninth of Ab, in the year 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar demolished the walls of Jerusalem and the homes of the notables, and burnt the Temple. A considerable but unspecified number of Judeans were carried off into captivity, swelling the ranks of those previously exiled.

Now, something entirely unexpected occurred. In contrast to the exiles of the Northern Kingdom, those of Judah created a new and unprecedented reality. They did not assimilate into the stronger and rather sophisticated Babylonian society; rather, they kept alive expectations for a return to Judah.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FOUR FATEFUL YEARS

What caused this remarkable turn of events? For one thing, the great charismatic prophet Ezekiel was among the first of the Judean exiles, and, without question, he served as the spiritual guide to the depressed captives. We are told of at least three occasions when elders of Judah sat in consultation with him (Ezek. 8:1, 14:1, 20:1). The very fact that the exiles had "elders" is a strong indication that there was internal organization that held them together as a national and religious entity.

However, this does not explain the new type of "Jew" that emerged after the calamities of 598 and 586. Some scholars maintain that this new phenomenon was due to monotheism, which does not allow a geographically-limited deity. However, according to Kaufmann, monotheism, albeit badly tainted with pagan practices and beliefs, was also the official religion of Northern Kingdom of Israel. Furthermore, pagan practices also prevailed in Judah. King Manasseh was no better in this respect than King Ahab. Even during the last days of the Southern Kingdom, the prophet Jeremiah denounced the worship of the Queen of Heaven (Jer. 44) and bewailed the building of high places for Baal and the atrocity of Molech worship in the Valley of Ge-hinnom [Gehenna] (II Kg. 32:35).

Jews in exile, cleansed of idolatry, remained steadfast in their Jewish identity, and were yearning for a return. It can be stated with near certainty that the 124 or 136 years, intervening between 722 to 598 or 586, were decisive for Judaism. These were the years of the great prophets: Hosea and Amos, Isaiah and Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Their messages, while not effective for their contemporaries, eventually and cumulatively had their impact and penetrated the very being of the Jewish soul.

What were they? Here, I shall enumerate only a few. In a pagan setting, a battle between two people is concurrently also waged between their deities. Hence, defeat of a people meant defeat of their deity, and victory of the enemy's deity, whom they now must accept and worship. Thus, Jephthah, in his dealings with the Ammonites who demanded the territory conquered by Israel from the Amorites centuries earlier, has this to say: *'Now then, the Lord of Israel dispossessed the Amorites before His people Israel. . . Do you not hold that Chemosh, your god gives you to possess?'* (Jud. 11:21-25). The Book of II Kings relates that the Rabshakeh, an official of the King of Assyria laying siege to Jerusalem, taunted King Hezekiah: *'Do not let your God. . . mislead you into thinking that Jerusalem will not be delivered into the hands of Assyria. . . . Were the nations that my predecessors destroyed. . . saved by their gods?'* (II Kg. 19:10).

While the exiles of the Northern Kingdom fell prey to such pagan views, the Judean exiles were firm in their belief, prepared for them by the warnings of the prophets, that defeat and dispersion was God's punishment for the sins and treachery of the people (see Ezek. 36:18).

Judeans in profound distress questioned whether the Covenant between God and Israel was still in force. Isaiah declared: *Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, wherewith I have put her away?* (Isa. 50:1). Jeremiah reassured them that, just as *If these ordinances [sun, moon, stars, the sea] depart from before Me . . . then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever* (Jer. 31:35-36). Inasmuch as Israel broke the previous Covenant, it was promised a new one: *I will be their God, and they shall be My people* (31:31-33). Ezekiel goes so far as to state that though the Lord has scattered Israel for its sins, profaning His holy Name, He owes it to Himself to sanctify His holy Name by gathering them from all the countries *and will bring them into their own land* (Ezek. 36:24). Jeremiah even set a date for the return: *For thus saith the Lord: After seventy years are accomplished for Babylon, I will remember you . . . causing you to return to this place* (Jer. 29:10).

DANIEL – TYPIFYING THE GALUT JEW

Usually, when reading the Book of Daniel, we think of the hero as a special person who interprets dreams and has apocalyptic visions. However, the Book reveals additional, significant dimensions of his personality, portraying him as the typical galut Jew. As a bright young man he, and his three friends Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah, are selected to serve in the royal palace. Resolving not to defile himself, Daniel eats only legumes and drinks nothing but water (1:12). Here we find the first instance of an individual who, living in two cultures, remains loyal to his government and faithful to God and His laws.

We ought to pay special attention to a beautiful prayer, which should be read in its entirety, contained in Chapter 9:1-19. Apparently stirred by Jeremiah's message sent to Babylonian Jewry, concerning the *70 years that He would accomplish the desolation of Jerusalem* (v. 2), Daniel made confession *to the Lord who stays faithful to His covenant* (v. 4). In his prayer, Daniel confesses that Judeans who trespassed against God, had not obeyed His servants the prophets (v. 6), and were therefore banished from their land and made a mockery of among all who were around them. This prayer affirms that God is still faithful to His Covenant, that it was the sins and treachery of the people that caused the destruction of Jerusalem and exile. In His great

EXILE AND RETURN

mercy, He will restore Jerusalem and anoint the Holy of Holies when the measure of transgression has been filled (v. 24).

Daniel's yearning for Jerusalem is so great that he had windows made in his upper chambers, where he prayed three times daily facing the holy city. The Babylonians considered this to be a capital crime and threw him into a lion's den, from which he is miraculously delivered (6:11-21). This is the first recorded instance of a Jew in exile facing Jerusalem in prayer, and one who is willing to die for his faith.

THE RETURN

When the Lord restored the prosperity of Zion

We were like unto them that dream

They who sow in tears shall reap in joy (Ps. 126).

Cyrus, a Persian chief, burst on the historic scene, advancing from one successful operation to another, and in the year 539 B.C.E. delivered a crushing defeat to the Babylonians. Thus the mighty Babylonian empire, having lasted a mere 66 years, came to an abrupt end, much to the joy and relief of the Judean exiles. It was followed by the Persian juggernaut that controlled much of the known world for 208 years. For reasons we can only speculate upon, Cyrus reversed the policies of the two preceding empires, Assyria and Babylonia, which exiled and exchanged populations who stood in the way of their expansionism. Soon after his ascension to the throne, he made his famous Proclamation, recorded in the first chapter of the Book of Ezra.

Essentially, this Proclamation authorized Jews in his newly acquired empire to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, and allowed those Jews who chose to remain in Persia to support the efforts of the returnees. He appointed Sheshbazzar to serve as "prince of the Judeans" and returned to him the holy vessels that had been pillaged by Nebuchadnezzar. What followed borders on the miraculous. 42,690 Judeans, not including women and children, returned, braving the difficulties of being uprooted again and facing a long journey, to begin a new life in an impoverished Judea. Undeterred by these difficulties, a national assembly is called, and two leaders, Zerubbabel (grandson of King Jehoiachin) and Joshua the high priest, lay the foundation of the new Temple and built an altar. Due to disturbances caused by adversaries, primarily the Samaritans, the building of the Temple stopped.

Jewish historiography, so vivid in the Books of Samuel and Kings, is not at its best in the Books of Ezra-Nehemiah. There are questions that trouble the curious mind and, in all probability, will never be answered. Did Cyrus' edict apply to other exiled peoples? If so, do we have a record that these returned to their original homelands? Are Sheshbazzar and Zerubabel the same person, or are they two separate individuals? What happened to Zerubabel, who suddenly left the stage of history?

THE SECOND PROCLAMATION

For the returnees, the coming to power of Darius the Great (522-486) was providential. After some initial reluctance about the efforts of rebuilding the Temple, there came an unexpected turning point, caused paradoxically by the enemies of the returnees. Intent on disrupting the work on the Temple and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, they addressed a letter to the regional governor, by the name of Tattenai. Informed by the Judeans that the authority for the work had been granted by Cyrus, he wrote to Darius, seeking his advice. The King ordered the archives to be searched, and the Proclamation of Cyrus was found in the citadel of Ecbatana. Thereupon, Darius wrote a letter to Tattenai, which not only confirmed the original privileges but added some very significant new ones, which indeed amount to a Second Proclamation.

In essence, these are the new provisions:

- a. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders rebuild the Temple.
- b. Expenses are to be paid out of the King's treasury, derived from taxes of the provinces "Beyond the River." Sacrifices offered will be accompanied by prayers "for the life of the King and his sons" (6:10).
- c. The daily sacrifices are at the "order of the priests of Jerusalem" (6:9).
- d. Work to be completed without delay, and penalty, even of death, to those who alter his decree.

These new provisions offer some degree of autonomy, give excessive power to the priests, and turn the Temple into some sort of "King's Sanctuary," guaranteeing its safety from disruptions by the enemy.

At this critical juncture in history, the returnees were blessed with the leadership of the appointed governor Zerubabel, the high priest Joshua, in charge of the Temple service, and two charismatic prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who encouraged the flagging efforts of the dispirited Judeans. With

EXILE AND RETURN

the encouragement of the new decree of Darius and by the leaders, the rebuilding of the Temple now progressed rapidly and was successfully completed. In 516, 70 years after Jeremiah's prophecy, 20 years after laying its foundation, the Temple was dedicated.

EZRA – NEHEMIAH

After these events, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, Ezra. . . came up from Babylon, a scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses (Ezra 7:1-6).

This event happened in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes (465-425); that is, in the year 458 BCE. Ezra came with a new contingent of returnees, equipped with a special letter of authorization from the King. What is the meaning of the cryptic *after these events*? There is an almost bleak hiatus of 60 years between the dedication of the Temple and Ezra's appearance in Jerusalem. It is only hints found in Nehemiah and Malachi that may enable us to reconstruct the conditions that prevailed in those dark 60 years.

Nehemiah reports: *The survivors . . . there in the province [Judea] are in dire trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's wall is full of breaches and its gates have been destroyed by fire (Neh. 1:3).*

From this it would seem that the economic and security situation in Jerusalem was in poor state. King Xerxes (486-465), son of Darius, identified by some as the fickle Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther, had been ill-disposed toward the Judeans. The great leadership of Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, and Zechariah, was gone. Governors of the Judean province were in all probability foreigners. Above all, there was moral and religious deterioration, especially of the priestly caste, as attested to by Malachi, the last in the line of prophets.

If only you would lock My doors, and not kindle fire on My altar to no purpose (Mal. 1:10). What a far cry from Haggai, who had encouraged Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest: *Go up to the hills and get timber and rebuild the House (Hag. 1:8)*, and only a mere 60 years after the dedication of the Temple.

What were the new authorizations given to Ezra? In essence, to regulate Judea and Judeans according to the law of "your" God, to appoint magistrates and judges to judge the people and to teach them. This edict by Artaxerxes,

given to Ezra in the form of a private letter, had an incalculable effect on the development of Judaism. The era of prophecy had come to an end. The Torah, until now in the hands of the priesthood, became the property of all the people. This counterbalanced the power vested in the priesthood in the time of Darius, and cemented the national life of the Jews. Tradition attributes to Ezra - Nehemiah the beginning of the *Anshei Knesset HaG'dola* [the Men of the Great Assembly].

In scholarly circles, controversy rages regarding who preceded whom, Ezra or Nehemiah. However, the controversy seems irrelevant. We should view them as two complementary personalities; Ezra the ready scribe, and Nehemiah, cup-bearer of King Artaxerxes, the capable and forceful administrator. What the first conceived, the second implemented. It was the Men of the Great Assembly, followed by the Pharisees, who unified the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, and turned them into the canon of the Holy Scriptures.

The Pharisees began, and after 600 years completed, the monumental Talmud. Years later, when the Temple again was burned to the ground – this time by the Romans – and the Jews were dispersed, the Torah together with the unfolding Talmud became the portable homeland.

In the course of millennia, Jews observed the rise and fall of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the disappearance of many other peoples, while they themselves were equipped with this "portable homeland" and survived. They withstood unbelievable odds, efforts at converting them, exiles and expulsions, and even attempts to exterminate them. They not merely survived, but kept the memory of Jerusalem alive and, in one of the great miracles of the twentieth century, they returned to their ancient homeland.

NOTES

1. Ephraim Stern, "Yes There Was," *Biblical Archeological Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2002) p. 39.

COLLEGE CREDIT

EXILE AND RETURN

Your students can earn significant college credit (or even a full, regionally accredited B.A.) for their knowledge in: Hebrew, *Tanakh*, Jewish Music, Talmud, and Jewish Law. See our Internet website: <http://www.jewishbible.org> for details.