

The Babylonian Exile

Unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians were astute victors, and the ten thousand captives carried off from Judah eleven years before the destruction of Jerusalem had been treated well.

Nebuchadnezzar recognized the nobility of the Jewish core element that had maintained its high moral standards in the face of adversity, and he sought to integrate this elite group into the multiethnic Babylonian tapestry, along with the elites of other communities in the far-flung empire.

As part of this program, the king invited the best and brightest young men from the various communities to live in the royal palace where they would be educated and trained for service. Among these apprentices were four young Jewish prodigies named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, and in order to integrate them better, Nebuchadnezzar gave them the Babylonian names Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel's rise in the imperial government was meteoric, and he became governor of Babylon. The others also rose to high positions.

At this point, there was a religious crisis. Nebuchadnezzar erected an enormous golden idol on the plain of Dura near Babylon, and he decreed that at specific times everyone had to bow down to it. All who refused would be thrown into a fiery furnace. This was not a religion decree. Those who bowed down were free to practice their own religion any way they saw fit. Rather, it was a political decree. Honoring the king included honoring his god. Failure to do so disrespected the king. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah refused to comply and were thrown into the

furnace. When they emerged safely, Nebuchadnezzar declared, “Praise be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and rescued His servants ... for no other god can save in this way.”¹

Protected by royal sanction, the Jewish exiles began to lay the foundations of the great Babylonian Jewish community that would endure for a thousand years.

The immediate concern of this first group of exiles was the preservation of the Torah, especially the Oral Law without which the Torah cannot be understood. From the beginning, the Oral Law had been passed down by a system of transmission supervised by the leading Torah sage of each generation. After Joshua, this task had been shouldered by the Judges, the Torah sages who were also the unofficial political leaders. With the rise of the monarchy, the stewardship of the Oral Law had been assumed by the unbroken succession of Prophets, which ran parallel to the royal succession. But now the kingdom was on the verge of collapse, and the dispersion had already begun. Jeremiah had prophesied that the exile would end after seventy years,² but what form would the restoration assume? Would there always be prophets to teach the people?³ And if not, how would the special bond between the Jewish people and God and His Torah be sustained?

Paradoxically, exile and captivity had brought the core element of the Jewish people more freedom than it had enjoyed in a century. In Babylon, there were no corrupt monarchs and pagan enthusiasts to battle for the Jewish soul. Confined to this distant land but breathing the heady air of spiritual freedom, these elite exiles, among whom there were a thousand sages, understood that the future of the Jewish people rested on

¹ Daniel 3:28-29.

² Jeremiah 25:12

³ Zechariah 1:5

their shoulders.⁴ They knew that it was their mission to form the nucleus of a rejuvenated Jewish nation, and they poured all their energies into creating a solid bedrock of Torah for the future. They established numerous yeshivahs in all the cities and towns where they settled,⁵ and the intense study of the Torah flourished.

The Jewish exiles also prospered economically and politically. They felt comfortable in the bounteous land which had been the birthplace of their ancestor Abraham and whose people spoke Aramaic, a kindred language to their own Hebrew.⁶ They built houses and raised families, planted gardens and vineyards and entered the government service.

Within a decade, the first exiles were firmly established on Babylonian soil, forming a community that was extraordinarily powerful by any measure. Relatively few in number, they were cohesive, learned, dynamic, wealthy and influential. And now, when the stunned survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem began to stream into Babylon in 423 b.c.e., they found a strong Jewish community awaiting them with open arms and open hearts.

Four years later, further Babylonian conquests of Phoenicia, Ammon and Moav, where many Jews had sought refuge, produced a new wave of exiles to Babylon.⁷ Eight years later, in 415 b.c.e., the conquest of Egypt and its Jewish refugee settlements added the last wave of exiles to the burgeoning Jewish community of Babylon; among them were the aged Jeremiah and his foremost disciple Baruch ben Neriah.⁸

The disease of paganism had finally been purged from the Jewish people. The horrors of the siege and fall of Jerusalem had brought the

⁴ Gittin 88a

⁵ Tosefos, Gittin 6a

⁶ Pesachim 87b

⁷ Rashi, Jeremiah 52:30

⁸ Redak, Jeremiah 44:28

people to their senses, and even if some still harbored secret pagan sympathies, the Jewish community of Babylon was too tightly constructed along strict Torah lines to be affected by them; the new waves of exiles, although far more numerous, were absorbed on the terms of the original exiles. The Jewish settlements spread, prospered and flourished in a burst of growth that caught the attention of their Babylonian hosts, but the Jewish people resisted assimilation. Bolstered by the hopeful prophecies of Ezekiel, they remained insular and steadfastly loyal to the Torah.

In 397 b.c.e., Evil-Merodach succeeded his father Nebuchadnezzar on the Babylonian throne. One of his first acts as king was to release the Jewish king Yehoiachin from prison, where he had moldered for thirty-seven years. The prophet Jeremiah saw fit to conclude the Book of Kings with a lengthy account of Yehoiachin's reinstatement as king of the Jews and his receiving first honors among the vassal kings of the Babylonian Empire. Clearly, Jeremiah saw this as a sign of divine grace amidst the exile. The Jewish nation had been reborn in exile, just as it had been born in the Egyptian exile a thousand years before. The Jewish nation was once again afire with the spirit of the Torah, secure, prosperous and respected, a self-governing kingdom in microcosm transplanted from its homeland into Babylonian exile.

But it was exile nonetheless. And as the wounds healed and the normal rhythms of life returned, the people sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept for the loss of their sacred homeland, for the blood that was shed and for glorious Jerusalem that was no more. But most of all, they wept for their estrangement from the Divine Presence that had resided in the Holy Temple. "For this, our hearts were sorrowful," they lamented. "For these, our eyesight blurred. For Mount Zion that lay in ruins, foxes scampered upon it. You, O God, shall reign eternal, Your throne will last

for all generations. Why do You forget us forever? Why do You abandon us for the longest time? Bring us back to You, O God, and we will return. Renew our days as of old.”⁹ Security and hope could ease the pain but not remove it completely.

As we look back at the first fifty years of the exile in Babylon, we are struck by the similarities to the early years of some of the subsequent Jewish diaspora communities. The Jews had been brought to Babylon for the benefit of the host country, and through talent, industry and solidarity, they rapidly achieved disproportionate influence and wealth. This pattern of Jewish exile would be repeated again and again.

In later years, we see the Jews invited to Poland in the twelfth century to serve as a national middle class, and we see King Frederick invite Jews to Berlin in the seventeenth century to help him build an empire; in each case, the Jews rapidly surpassed the indigenous population. In the seventeenth century, we see mercantile competition with Holland cause Oliver Cromwell to readmit Jews to Great Britain, and in the nineteenth century, we see Jews welcomed to the shores of America, along with all other immigrants; in each case, the Jews rose quickly to the top.

As we continue to trace the pattern of the Babylonian experience, the uncanny foreshadowing of the future persists, and developments take an ominous turn.

For over a century, the vassal kingdoms of Media and Persia in northern Mesopotamia had consolidated their power under the umbrella of imperial Assyria and then Babylon. The Median and Persian kingdoms were closely related ethnically, linguistically and culturally. Media ruled the northern part of the Iranian plateau, while Persia ruled

⁹ Eichah 5:17-20

the southern part. They were also connected by intermarriage between the royal houses and a confluence of interests.

For generations, they had sought to expand their sphere of influence northward into the Greek states of Asia Minor and beyond to Scythia, the site of present-day Russia. A number of disastrous wars with the tenacious Greeks, however, convinced them of the ultimate futility of such an endeavor and diverted their expansionist ambitions southward towards the imperial centers of Mesopotamia itself.

In 372 b.c.e., Darius, king of Media, formed an alliance with his son-in-law Cyrus, king of Persia, resulting in a virtual union between the two kingdoms. Together, the Persian and Median forces conquered Babylon and killed Belshazzar, who had succeeded to the throne. Darius, known to history as Darius the Mede, became the first king of the new empire, and the imperial capital was established in the Median capital of Ecbatana. Under Darius, the Jews continued to prosper, and the talented Daniel became the vizier of the empire. In 371 b.c.e., Darius was killed on the battlefield. He was succeeded by his Persian son-in-law Cyrus, who moved the imperial capital to Shushan in Persia.

One of Cyrus's first acts as emperor was to authorize the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Holy Temple. The proclamation sparked great rejoicing among the Jews, because it signaled the end of their captivity. Most Babylonian Jews, however, chose not to avail themselves of their newfound freedom. After a half century of adjustment, they had settled into a comfortable existence, both spiritually and financially, and they were not prepared to uproot their families and face the hardships and vicissitudes of reclaiming the desolate ancestral lands. Instead, they offered financial support to the returnees and bided their time. A large number of Jews, however, did relocate to Shushan when the seat of the imperial government shifted to the Persian capital.

In the same year of Cyrus's proclamation, some forty thousand Jews set out from Babylon to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubabel ben Shealtiel, a descendant of the Davidic dynasty. They set up camp amid the overgrown rubble of the city under the suspicious scrutiny of the tribes who occupied the land, and they began to build the Second Temple. Not unexpectedly, problems immediately developed.

The Samaritans, natives of Cutha who had been resettled in Shomron by the Assyrians two centuries before, offered to assist the construction. Suspecting that they intended sabotage, Zerubabel politely declined their offer. The Samaritans immediately revealed their true colors and began harassing and terrorizing the settlers in order to disrupt the progress of the work. In 370 b.c.e., the Samaritans wrote to Cyrus accusing the Jews of seditious intent, and Cyrus withdrew his authorization. The work ground to a halt, and the embattled Jewish community stagnated among the stark reminders of the ruined past and the interrupted present.

In 369 b.c.e., Achashverosh¹⁰ succeeded Cyrus to the Persian throne. Unlike his predecessors, he was hostile to the Jews. He confirmed the suspension of the construction of the Holy Temple. Nevertheless, the wealth and influence of the Jews within the borders of the empire continued to grow. Then, in 357 b.c.e., an incident took place in Shushan that chillingly foreshadowed an all-too-common experience of the eventual Jewish diaspora.

As chronicled in the Book of Esther, a high Persian courtier of Amalekite lineage named Haman convinced Achashverosh to sanction

¹⁰ The correct Persian alliteration of this name is Chsharshya. In Hebrew, this guttural name is softened somewhat and becomes Achashverosh. In Greek, with its paucity of harsh consonant sounds, the name is further adapted and becomes Xerxes. The name Artaxerxes appears in Greek lists of the Persian kings. This is a Greek rendering of Artachshasta based on the erroneous assumption that this is a personal name. In actuality, it is a generic Persian term for king, such as Pharaoh for the Egyptian kings and Avimelech for the Philistine kings. See Rashi, Ezra 4:7, 6:14.

the extermination and pillage of his Jewish subjects. The queen at the time was Mordechai's niece Esther; she had been coerced into marrying the king but had never revealed her Jewish identity. With great courage, and the support of her people who fasted and prayed, the queen foiled Haman's plans and brought about his downfall.

The Jewish people realized that they had been delivered by divine providence, and in commemoration, Mordechai and Esther established the annual festival of Purim, during which the Book of Esther is read in its entirety. But in the entire book, there is no mention of God, who had wrought these miracles, because the hand of God had been concealed. There were no supernatural occurrences; the sea did not split, there were no pillars of fire, nor did the sun stand still in the sky. There was only providence manipulating ordinary events. And in the future, when the Jewish people would survive calamity after calamity without the force of arms but through providence alone, the story of Esther would glow as a beacon of hope and inspiration in the darkest of times.

In 355 b.c.e., Achashverosh was succeeded by his son Darius II. More favorably inclined toward the Jews, Darius rescinded the suspension orders of Cyrus and Achashverosh, and in 353 b.c.e., the construction of the Holy Temple resumed—exactly seventy years after the destruction, as prophesied by Jeremiah. Four years later, it was completed.

The restoration of a Jewish national entity in the ancestral homeland had begun, but the construction of the Temple was only a small beginning. Unlike the First Temple which had been built as the crowning glory of Solomon's mature and successful kingdom, the Second Temple was built while the majority of Jews remained in Mesopotamia; it was a cornerstone rather than a crown. For the most part, the work of molding the new society still lay ahead. The great leap forward came in 348

b.c.e., a year after the Second Temple was completed.

Before closing, it is important to note that the dates given in this book follow the traditional chronology supported by numerous Talmudic and Midrashic sources. The Medean-Persian Empire had only four kings. The First Temple was built in 830 b.c.e. and was destroyed 410 years later in 420 b.c.e. when the Babylonian exile began. The Second Temple was built in 350 b.c.e. and stood for 420 years. The secular chronology claims that the First Temple was destroyed in 586 b.c.e., leaving a gap of 166 years for which there is no account in Jewish or any other history. Paul Johnson mentions this puzzling gap and writes, “Perhaps they were happy.”¹¹ Funny. There is an excellent monograph on this topic by Dr. Chaim Cheifetz. The article is posted on my website, see links below.

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¹¹ Johnson, A History of the Jews, p. xx.