

Old Testament History
by
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Part Seven
Between the Testaments:
The Persian Period

CHAPTER 84

The Problems and Progress of the Jews

1. The Samaritans

The name *Samaria* first appears in the Bible as the name of the capital of the Northern Kingdom. Omri and Ahab built luxurious palaces there, and on occasion the name of the capital is used for the whole kingdom. Samaria was the last city of Israel to fall to the Assyrians. In 722/721 a large number of influential citizens were deported to various cities of the Assyrian Empire. Conversely, colonies of non-Jews from Babylonia, Syria, and Elam were settled in Samaria (II Kings 17:24-29). The result was a mixed population and a disposition to worship Yahweh as the god of the land, along with a reverence for the other gods which the new settlers had formerly worshiped.

The latter kings of Judah, particularly Hezekiah (during whose reign Samaria fell) and Josiah seem to have attempted to expand their borders northward to include some of the territory formerly ruled from Samaria. Faithful Yahwists made their way down to the Jerusalem Temple and relations between Samaria and Judah were quite cordial.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile, taking place about a century and a half after the fall of Samaria, seem to have changed the picture somewhat. During the time that there was no effective government in Jerusalem, the Samaritans and other neighbors of the Jews were able to occupy former Judean territory and develop a new economy in which the Jews-in-exile had no part. Such Jews as remained in Palestine doubtless made their peace with their neighbors, and a new mode of life was developed.

When the first settlers returned to Jerusalem, following the decree of Cyrus (536 B.C.), the Samaritans and their neighbors faced a crisis. If the Jews were to become independently strong, the possessions of the Samaritans might be threatened. From the earliest days of their settlement, the returned exiles met with difficulty from the Samaritans and their other neighbors.

The Samaritans offered to help in the rebuilding operations, but they were rebuffed. The Jews had learned that cooperation with the idolater would bring the judgment of God. They chose to labor on alone.

When Sanballat, the governor of Samaria under the Persians, was unable to get at the Jewish problem by cooperation, he chose the path of attempted coercion. Neither threats nor armed intervention succeeded, however. The Jews were able to rebuild Temple and walls without outside help and in spite of outside interference.

One of the burdens of Ezra and Nehemiah was that of the mixed marriages of many of the colonists who had returned from Babylon. One of the sons of Joiada, the High Priest, married a daughter of Sanballat, governor of Samaria. This was not only a mixed marriage, but a marriage with an avowed enemy. When the son of the priest, Manasseh by name, refused to give up his Samaritan bride, Nehemiah expelled him.

We know that the Samaritans had a temple on Mt. Gerizim which was destroyed by the Jews in the days of John Hyrcanus. Josephus says that this temple was built by Sanballat for Manasseh so that he could both function as priest and be married to Sanballat's daughter. Other priests who refused to divorce their non-Jewish brides are said to have joined Manasseh (*Antiquities* XI. vii, viii). The Josephus account is repudiated by some scholars, including Montgomery, who regards it simply as a midrash on Nehemiah.

In succeeding years the Jews and the Samaritans became bitter enemies. The statement in John 4, "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans," had behind it years of bitterness between the two peoples. It is noteworthy that Jesus saw fit to go through Samaria and thus show that His disciples were not to allow any restrictions to be placed on the preaching of the gospel. The Parable of the Good Samaritan and the miracle in which the Samaritan is commended as the one who returned to thank God for cleansing from leprosy further illustrate the attitude which Jesus commended toward those who would be looked upon as aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.

2. The Jews of Elephantine

During the years 1907 and 1908 excavations were carried on at the island of Elephantine, ancient Yeb, opposite Assuan (Syene, Ezek. 29:10; 30:6) at the first cataract of the Nile. Many ancient papyri written in Aramaic were discovered. They were written by Jews between the years 494 and 400 B.C. Most of them were business documents, involving contracts for loans, conveyance of property, and similar activities. The names used are familiar to all readers of the Bible. They include Hosea, Zephaniah, Jonathan, Zechariah, Nathan, and Azariah.

The most interesting document is a letter written in 407 B.C. and addressed to Bigvai, the governor of Judea. It tells how Egyptian priests, with the connivance of the local governor

and the active assistance of the governor's son, destroyed the temple which the Jews had built at Elephantine:

"They entered that temple and razed it to the ground. The stone pillars that were there they smashed. Five 'great' gateways built with hewn blocks of stone which were in that temple, they demolished . . . and their roof of cedar wood, all of it . . . and whatever else was there, everything they burnt with fire. As for the basins of gold and silver and other articles that were in that temple, they carried all of them off and made them their own."¹

The Egyptian priests resented the sanctuary of an alien deity in their midst, and determined to cleanse their land of its defilement. They doubtless found enough anti-Jewish sentiment among the people to implement their purposes.

The Elephantine Jews asked help in rebuilding their temple.²

"Now your servants Yedoniah and his colleagues and the Jews, the citizens of Elephantine, all say thus: If it please our lord, take thought of this temple to rebuild it, since they do not let us rebuild it. Look to your well-wishers and friends here in Egypt. Let a letter be sent from you to them concerning the temple of the God Yaho, to build it in the fortress of Elephantine as it was built before; and the meal-offering, incense, and burnt offering will be offered in your name and we shall pray for you at all times, we, and our wives, and our children, and the Jews who are here, all of them if you do thus, so that that temple is rebuilt. And you shall have a merit before Yaho the God of Heaven more than a man who offers to him burnt offering and sacrifices worth a thousand talents of silver and (because of) gold. Because of this we have written to inform you. We have also set the whole matter forth in a letter in our name to Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat the governor of Samaria. Also, Arsames³ knew nothing of all that was done to us. On the twentieth of Marheshwan, year 17 of King Darius."⁴

The Elephantine Jews, while much concerned about the temple and worship of the God of Israel, whom they called Yahu or Yaho, did not maintain the purity of worship insisted on by the prophets of Israel. Among the other gods whom they worshiped were Ishumbethel, Herembethel, 'Anathbethel, and 'Anathyahu. Anath was the Canaanite goddess of fertility and war, sister and consort of Baal. The name at Elephantine seems to imply that she was there regarded as the consort of Yahu.

1 Pap. 1, 9-13; H. L. Ginsberg's Translation.

2 Pap. 1, 22-30, *op. cit.*

3 Arsames was the satrap of Egypt. According to an earlier passage in the papyrus (4,5) he was in the Persian court during the time of the outrage.

4 Darius II, 424-405 B.C.

The very existence of a temple and fully developed sacrificial system indicates that the Elephantine Jews rejected the concept of a single central sanctuary as the place to which sacrifices to Yahu (Yahweh) must be brought. Through much of the history of the divided kingdom a conflict existed between those who advocated a central sanctuary and those who preferred the multitudinous "high places." The unity of the God of Israel was inherent in the concept of a central sanctuary, and reformers like Josiah (621 B.C.) insisted on destroying the "high places" as centers of idolatry. The pagan elements in the religion of the Elephantine Jews would underscore the necessity for insisting on the Jerusalem Temple as the one place where sacrifice might be offered.

The Elephantine Jews doubtless considered themselves to be wholly orthodox. Their letters mention the observance of the Jewish Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. A priesthood and sacrificial system patterned after that of the Jerusalem Temple functioned at Elephantine. The fact that appeals are made to Samaria as well as to Jerusalem indicates that the Elephantine Jews did not deem it necessary to take sides in the conflict between Jerusalem and Samaria.

The origin of the Elephantine community has puzzled scholars, and no theory that has been propounded is without its problems. Contracts, favorable and unfavorable, had been maintained between Israelites and Egypt from patriarchal times. When Jeroboam found it necessary to flee from King Solomon, he found sanctuary in Egypt. A party friendly to Egypt had existed in both Samaria and Jerusalem before the destruction of these capital cities by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Jeremiah had urged Zedekiah not to heed the pro-Egyptian party, but the promise of aid from Egypt was a deciding factor in Zedekiah's defiance of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah was taken to Egypt where he presumably spent his last days.

One of the Elephantine papyri clearly indicates that the Jewish colony there antedates the invasion of Egypt by Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus: "Now our forefathers built this temple in the fortress of Elephantine back in the days of the Kingdom of Egypt, and when Cambyses came to Egypt he found it built. They knocked down all the temples of the gods of Egypt, but no one did any damage to this temple."⁵

The apocryphal *Letter of Aristeas* states that Jews entered Egypt with "the Persian" (Cambyses), and that others had earlier come to Egypt to fight as mercenaries in the army of Pharaoh Psammeticus. Herodotus tells us that Psammeticus II (593-588 B.C.) waged war with the Ethiopians. This leads to the supposition that the Jewish mercenaries were used by Psammeticus in this war, after which they were garrisoned at Elephantine, near the Egyptian-Ethiopian border.

If this reconstruction of the history is correct, the settlement which produced the

5 Pap. 1, 14-15, *op. cit.*

Elephantine papyri was comprised of the descendants of these earlier settlers, possibly augmented by fresh recruits from Palestine, all of whom were now serving in the Persian army.

While this view appears plausible, and cannot be ruled out as a possibility, there are several problems. The language of the papyri is Aramaic, rather than Hebrew. It would be supposed that Jews coming to Egypt before the Exile would have brought their mother tongue with them. A further problem is one of chronology. Psammetichus II was on the throne of Egypt during the years immediately preceding the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. Are we to picture Jewish soldiers forsaking their own land to fight in the army of Psammetichus against the Ethiopians? Psammetichus seems to have had access to Greek mercenaries, so that there would have been no real need for Jewish recruits.

Another theory, suggested by W. O. E. Oesterley, maintains that the Elephantine Colony was comprised of northern Israelites from Assyria. It is suggested that the second generation of the captives who were removed from Israel after the fall of Samaria were enrolled, either voluntarily or by compulsion, in the army of Ashurbanipal. After Ashurbanipal's conquest of Egypt, Assyrian garrisons were stationed in various parts of the country. The Assyrian hold on Egypt was short-lived, however. Ashurbanipal's victories dated from 667 B.C., but by 663 B.C. Psammetichus I had cleared out the Assyrian garrisons. Oesterley assumes that Psammetichus recognized the Elephantine garrison as Israelite, and permitted the Israelites to enlist in his own army. He suggests that these Israelites would be glad to remain away from Assyria. The language of that part of the Assyrian Empire from which they came was Aramaic, hence the Aramaic of the Elephantine papyri.

Oesterley's view also helps explain the reason for addressing a request for aid to the Samaritans. Presumably the larger part of the community owed its ancestral origins to Samaria. The elements of paganism at Elephantine have something in common with the Scriptural description of the Samaritans who "feared Yahweh" but also served other gods.

While a final word concerning the origin of the Elephantine community cannot yet be given, and no view is without objections, the existence of the community shows us something of the development of Jewish religion during the Persian period. If a reformer like Nehemiah appears Puritanical in his attitude toward his Samaritan neighbors, Elephantine shows the danger which beset a community which left its moorings and allowed a religious syncretism in which Yahweh could be associated with a pantheon of deities.

3. The Synagogue

Origin of the Synagogue

During the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament period, there arose

the institution which was to become the focal point of Jewish life through the centuries. No record has been left of the origin of synagogue worship. Jewish tradition suggests that the first synagogues were established during the time of Babylonian Exile.

Pre-exilic Judaism looked to the Jerusalem Temple as the focal point of its spiritual life. Worship at local shrines, or "high places," continued through much of Israelite history, but the prophets, and the kings who supported them, abolished such worship and insisted on the primacy of the Temple. In this way the unity of the God of Israel was emphasized, in contrast to the concept of local gods which was prevalent in the ancient world. Jeremiah complained of his generation, ". . . according to the number of thy cities are thy gods, O Judah" (2:28).

When the armies of Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem with its Temple, a new orientation was demanded in the worship of the Israelite. According to popular views, a god was expected to protect his people, and the victory of an enemy meant that the gods of the enemy were the strongest of the contending divine beings. Wars were fought on two levels -- human and divine. The strongest god would win.

Many in Israel doubtless shared these viewpoints, for the temptation to idolatry and conformity with the current religious practices and ideals was an ever present one. This was not true, however, of those religious leaders of the Jews whom we call the prophets. Defeat in battle did not mean that the God of Israel was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians. It meant that Israel's God was chastening His rebelling people. The prophets saw a divine purpose in Israel's calamities. Daniel writes, "The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand" (1:2). The destruction of the Temple was not an evidence of the weakness of Israel's God, but an evidence of His holiness.

Psalm 137 describes the attitude of exiles in Babylon. They are in a strange land, weeping at the remembrance of Zion. Their captors ask them to sing one of the songs of Zion, but Israel protests, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" They remember Jerusalem, and long for the day of restoration.

All evidence, including the prophetic word of Jeremiah, indicated that the Exile would be a long one. Before Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah had written to the exiles who had been deported earlier, "Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens and eat the fruit of them; take ye wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands . . . and seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it, for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace" (29:5-7).

With the destruction of the Temple, sacrifices ceased. Prayer, and the study of the sacred Scriptures, however, knew no geographical limitations. The Book of Ezekiel describes the elders of Israel gathering in the prophet's house (8:1; 20:1-3). Such gatherings became

more regular and more organized in nature, resulting in the weekly synagogue services, after which the weekly services in the Christian church were patterned.

The word *synagogue* is of Greek origin, meaning a gathering of people, or a congregation. The Hebrew word for such a gathering is *keneseth*, the name used for the parliament in the modern state of Israel. The word *synagogue* is used for the local congregation of Jews and also for the building in which the community meets for its assemblies and services. In Hebrew the building may be referred to as the *beth hakkeneseth*, "the house of assembly."

With the return from Exile following the decree of Cyrus, a second Temple was built in Jerusalem. This again became the focal point of Jewish religious life until its destruction in A.D. 70. Large numbers of Jews did not return to Palestine, however, and the institution of the synagogue continued to fill the spiritual needs of Jews who remained in "the dispersion," whether in Babylon, other cities of the Persian Empire, Egypt, or -- later -- the cities of Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. In New Testament times we read: "For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues" (Acts 15:21).

For the Jews who returned to Palestine, the synagogue became the place of prayer and Bible study, as the Temple served as the place of sacrifice and the center of the great annual convocations. In Nehemiah 8 we read of a great gathering for the public reading of the "Book of the Law of Moses." Ezra made use of a pulpit, or platform, from which he read and explained the Scriptures to the assembled throngs. The fact that the Scriptures were written in Hebrew, and that Aramaic was the spoken language of post-exilic Judaism, provided a further reason for gatherings to translate and interpret the ancient Scripture. In Palestine, as in the dispersion, a quorum of ten heads of families could organize a synagogue.

In the larger towns a body of twenty-three elders formed the sanhedrin, or governing body of the synagogue community. In small communities the number of elders was seven. These elders (*presbuteroi*) are sometimes called rulers, (*archontes*). From this group one was designated "chief ruler" (*gerousiarches*). The sanhedrin served as a court, and in Judea it represented the civil as well as the religious government. Punishment by scourging, excommunication, and death could be decreed. Scourging was inflicted in the synagogue building. It consisted of "forty stripes save one" (cf. II Cor. 11:24; Josephus *Antiquities* iv. 8:21). Excommunication was regarded as a more serious sentence. In its earliest form it meant absolute and final exclusion from the Jewish community. The Hebrew term descriptive of this is *herem*. This is the equivalent of the Greek *anathema*, descriptive of one who is under the curse of God. A temporary excommunication (Hebrew *nidduy*) later developed as a severe rebuke to those whose transgression was not so outrageous as to evoke the *anathema*.

Although the sanhedrin could impose the death penalty in extreme cases, under the

Roman rule capital punishment required the confirmation of the Roman procurator (cf. John 18:31).

Each community had its local sanhedrin, but that of Jerusalem attained the eminence of the highest Jewish judicatory. This became known as the Great Sanhedrin. It was presided over by the High Priest and met in a hall associated with the Temple structure. Scribes and the most eminent members of the high-priestly families were associated with the Great Sanhedrin. Its mandates were recognized wherever Jews dwelt (cf. Acts 9:2).

Synagogue Worship

The worship services of the synagogue enjoyed great freedom. Any competent Israelite could officiate. The liberty which was accorded the apostle Paul illustrates this fact.

The leaders of the worship at the synagogue were not the same as those who cared for the legal side of the life of the community, although the same persons could serve in both capacities. The "ruler of the synagogue" (*archisunagogos*) supervised the service and assumed responsibility for the care and order of the synagogue building. The *hazzan*, or "minister" (A.V.), of the synagogue brought the Scriptures to the reader and replaced them in their receptacle after the lesson had been read. He served as the agent of the sanhedrin in scourging offenders, and is thought by some to have been responsible for the teaching of children.

Synagogue worship was doubtless very simple in its early history. The elements of prayer and the reading and explanation of a portion of Scripture were doubtless parts of the service from the earliest days. By the time of the Mishna (2nd and 3rd centuries after Christ) five principal parts of the service are enumerated: The Shema, prayer, the reading of the Law, the reading of the prophets with the benediction, and the translation and explanation of the Scripture lesson.

The Shema receives its name from the Hebrew word meaning "hear." It consists of Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41. A benediction is uttered before and after the reading of the *Shema*. The reciting of the *Shema* doubtless stems from the desire of the pious in Israel to teach the sacredness and importance of the Law. Outward, symbolic signs known as frontlets (N.T. "phylacteries") are enjoined as reminders of God's Law. The opening words of the *Shema* were quoted by Jesus (Mark 12:29) in answer to the question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" The use of phylacteries and fringes is well known in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 23:5), giving evidence of the use of the *Shema* in the synagogue service during pre-Christian times. The conception of the *Shema* as a confession of faith and a substitute for animal sacrifices is a later development.

At the beginning of the second century the chief prayer of the synagogue was the *Shemoneh*

'*esreh*, "eighteen (Benedictions)." These prayers traditionally are ascribed to the time of Ezra, with a final redaction around A.D. 110 by Rabbi Simeon ha-Pakkoli. In point of fact the New Testament does not give evidence of a fixed form of prayer. Great leaders and learned rabbis seem to have suggested suitable prayers which were adopted by their disciples. We are told that John the Baptist taught his disciples a form of prayer (Luke 11:1). The disciples asked Jesus to do likewise, and the Savior responded with the Lord's Prayer.

The present form of the *Shemoneh 'esreh* comes from the period subsequent to the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70). It exists in two different recensions, one from Palestine and the other from Babylon.

The reading of a lesson from the Law was the most prominent part of the synagogue service. Tradition says, "Moses instituted the reading of the Law on the sabbaths, feast-days, new moons, and half feast days; and Ezra appointed the reading of the Law for Mondays and Thursdays and the sabbath afternoons" (Jer. Meg. 75a). Actually the development of the reading of the Law went through a varied history. There were annual cycles for completing the reading of the Law, two-year cycles, three, and three-and-a-half-year cycles in use at different times. These cycles were based on the consecutive reading of the Law, with portions assigned for both weekdays and Sabbaths. Special readings were chosen for the four Sabbaths before passover, festivals, half-festivals, new moons, and fast days.

Every Israelite, even minors, could partake in the public reading of the Law. On the Sabbath day at least seven readers were chosen. If priests were present, they were called on first, followed by Levites, and then by lay members of the congregation. Special benedictions were pronounced by the first reader before the reading, and by the last reader at the end. After each verse an Aramaic rendering (*targum*) was given by an interpreter (*methurgeman*). In Palestine the interpreters were not permitted to use written translations. They were required to adhere to the traditional rendering and to refrain from allegorizing.

The selection of a portion from the Prophets forms a further step in the development of the synagogue ritual. The readings from the Prophets seem to have been chosen with a view to the explanation or illustration of the Law. It is thought that the reading of prophetic portions had not yet been systematized by New Testament times, and that the selection read by Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16) was His own choice. As in the case of the Law, an interpreter translated the lesson from the Prophets into Aramaic. He was permitted to translate three verses at a time from the prophetic portions.

Although the sermon was not an essential part of the synagogue service, the translation and explanation of the Scripture lesson was a step in the direction of a preaching service. There is evidence that an exposition of the lesson formed a part of the Sabbath afternoon

service. In earliest times the sermon seems to have been connected with the reading from the Prophets. Anyone able to instruct might be asked to preach (Acts 13:15). The preacher spoke from a sitting position on an elevated place (Luke 4:20).

At the close of the service a blessing was pronounced by a priestly member of the congregation. All present responded with an Amen. If no priest or Levite was present, the blessing was made into a prayer.

The Building

Our knowledge of the synagogue buildings is derived from descriptions in ancient literature and the discovery of the ruins of ancient synagogues by archaeologists. The chief article of furniture in the synagogue was the "ark," containing the scrolls of the Law and other sacred writings. The ark stood by the wall farthest from the entrance. In the center of the synagogue was a raised platform (*bemah*), on which was placed a lectern. The rest of the room contained wooden seats. The chief seats were those nearest to the ark, facing the people. Since the Middle Ages, women have been assigned to the balconies of orthodox synagogues, but it is not at all certain that this was true in antiquity. There is evidence, on the contrary, that women could sit in the chief seats of the synagogue and bear titles of honor in the synagogue.

Probably the most spectacular synagogue discovery is that of Dura-Europus in Syria, excavated by M. I. Rostovtzeff of Yale from 1932-1935. Elaborate murals show such scenes as the resurrection of the dry bones described by Ezekiel, and the anointing of David.

As a rule the front of a synagogue faced Jerusalem, and contained three entrances. There was a desire to place the synagogue on the highest spot in the city. Proximity to water was desirable because of the necessity for ceremonial ablutions.

Most of our information on ancient synagogues comes from the period after the ministry of Jesus. It does exhibit, however, a variety which was hardly expected. Elaborate murals, mosaics with designs of lions, horses, goats, and different varieties of birds, elaborate Doric and Corinthian type pillars show a feeling for art which was earlier thought incompatible with Jewish loyalty to the Law which forbade "graven images." It may be unwise to generalize as the result of a limited number of synagogue discoveries, but it seems safe to say that varying attitudes existed among the Jews with reference to art in the synagogue. In some ages, and in some places, a very tolerant attitude prevailed. In other times, a rigorous attitude toward the law resulted in iconoclastic movements.

Renan called the synagogue "the most original and fruitful creation of the Jewish people." As an institution it has been the rallying point of Judaism from the Babylonian Exile to the present day. In Jewish synagogues Jesus spoke and Paul preached. The earliest Christian

church adapted the synagogue type of service as the vehicle of Christian growth and evangelism. Without the development of the synagogue, neither Judaism nor Christianity could exist as we know them today.