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INFLUENCE OF THE BABYLONIAN EXILE ON THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

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Disaster and sorrow compel either a soul or a nation to seek anew the foundations of life. Times of sorrow are accordingly times of religious growth. The Babylonian exile was no exception. Indeed, the influence of this exile upon the religion of Israel was enormous. This was in part due to the fact that the exile was the external event necessary to crystallize the results of prophetic influences which had been at work for a long time, but it was also in part due to the deepening and clarifying of religious perception which disaster and sorrow bring.

The influence of the Babylonian exile is discernible in three great realms of life: (1) in the apprehension of religious truth; (2) in the outward organization of the religious life; and (3) in the standards of public morals. We shall endeavor briefly to treat each of these points, but before doing so a few words are necessary with reference to the nature of the exile itself.

It is often popularly supposed that at the time of the Babylonian exile Israel's life was completely broken off, and that the whole population was transported en masse to Babylonia. Such certainly was not the case. Nebuchadrezzar made two deportations of the higher officials, the priests, and the more wealthy citizens. One of these was in 598, the other in 586. Counting the families of those who were deported, probably not more than 25,000 or 30,000 people, all told, were transported. The great mass of the population, which in every country constitutes the poorer classes, was left in Palestine. The life of the poor thus left behind, robbed of their leaders, their capital desolated, and their land's trade ruined, must have been very hard. The most of those capable of leading in thought and action were with the exiles in Babylonia. It thus came about that, though the life of

the nation was not absolutely uprooted, the exiles exerted upon the future a degree of influence far out of proportion to their numbers.

The influence of the exile upon the apprehension of religious truth is disclosed in the study of one or two of the greatest personalities of the period—Jeremiah and the Second Isaiah. These were the two greatest thinkers of the time, and in their presentation of religious truth we ascertain the forefront of religious thought—the “new theology” of the period.

In the years of struggle while the exile was impending Jeremiah had under its shadow grasped the great truth that religion is inward in character, that it is a matter of the heart, and that no outward temple or ritual is necessary to its maintenance. This was a great step forward. Little more than a century before Isaiah had declared that Jerusalem was necessary to the worship of Yahweh and that he would defend it (Isa. 31:5). Jeremiah on the contrary declared that Yahweh would himself destroy the Holy City (see 22:1-12), and that in the future God's covenant with his people was to be a covenant of the heart, not an outward covenant of stones and ceremonies (Jer. 31:33). This great step forward in religious thinking was most timely. In the years to come when the sanctuary was desolate, and when many Jews were exiles in distant lands, it was this faith that religion was a matter of inward attitude rather than outward institution that kept Hebrew faith alive. Without it the Judaism of later times could never have been born.

Closely connected with the great truth of the inwardness of religion are three other great religious truths first set forth by Jeremiah under the shadow of the exile which are of prime importance. These are theoretical monotheism, or the recognition that the gods of the heathen are figments of the imagination, the perception that God is as willing to welcome penitent Gentiles as penitent Jews to his worship, and the fact of individual responsibility in morals.

Practical monotheism was from the time of Amos the working theory of all of Israel's prophets, but until Jeremiah no one had declared the non-existence of heathen deities. That step Jere-

miah took, telling his contemporaries that such gods were mere "vanities" or figments of the imagination (Jer. 10:15; 14:22). Of course he did not succeed in persuading all his contemporaries to adopt this view, and the older view, that a heathen deity represented some sort of a reality, lingered on for centuries. St. Paul, though he agreed with Jeremiah in principle (I Cor. 8:4 ff.), was still unable to shake himself entirely free from the older view (I Cor. 10:20). Nevertheless the insight of Jeremiah was very significant, and did much to clarify religious thinking.

Similarly Jeremiah's conception of the attitude of Yahweh toward the Gentile nations was much in advance of that of Isaiah. Isaiah (10:5 ff.) had represented Assyria as existing simply as a rod with which Yahweh could chastise Israel, and just as a father, when the whipping is over, breaks the useful switch and throws it away, so Yahweh, when his correction of Israel was completed, would break his rod, Assyria, and cast her aside. The thought underlying this was that God loves Israel only, and that all other nations exist only for her benefit. Jeremiah, on the other hand, pictures a time when all nations shall awaken to the fact that their gods are vanities and lies and shall come with confession to Yahweh and shall be welcomed by him (16:19-21).

In early Semitic life the family was such a unit that it stood or fell together. A good example of this is the story of the punishment of Achan in Josh., chap. 7. The prophets of the eighth century had denounced the sins of the nation rather than the sins of individuals. Individual sins seemed to gain their significance from their effect on the nation. Jeremiah, on the other hand, enunciates the great principle of individual responsibility in morals (31:29, 30), and in this he was cordially seconded by Ezekiel (see Ezek., chap 18). How much the recognition of this principle meant to a healthy moral and religious life cannot be overestimated. These four great steps forward in the apprehension of the true principles of religion and morals had been taken by Jeremiah under the impending shadow of the exile. His sensitive spirit, because of its premonitions of impending change, grasped these more spiritual and fundamental truths.

In one respect the Second Isaiah, some forty years later, enlarged

the theory of religion. The contribution of this prophet to religious thought relates to the solution of the problem of suffering. As in exile he brooded over the reason why the leaders of his people had been torn from their homes and the independence of his land destroyed, he saw in these events the fulfilment of a divine mission. Like Jeremiah he believed that Yahweh would welcome the coming of the heathen to himself, but he went beyond Jeremiah in believing that God had chosen Israel to be his missionary, and the sufferings involved in the uprooting of the people which had marred the nation's beauty and left only the unlovely stump of her peasant population in the dry ground, was in part vicarious. Israel had suffered at the Lord's hand double for all her sins (Isa. 40:2). The half of this was for the sins of the nations. Later (52:15) he pictures the kings of these nations as standing astonished at Israel's sufferings, and then in a flash of insight perceiving that "he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (53:4 ff.).

It was thus that this unnamed preacher took up the great thought of Jeremiah as to God's universal care for the nations and made it illuminate the old faith that Israel was the chosen people. She had been conceited, thinking that she was chosen for her superior worth; her real choice was that through knowledge of God and through suffering she might win the world to him. This great flash of insight was directly born out of the crushing pain of the exile.

It in no way detracts from this great conception that it was unheeded by the prophet's contemporaries and plays almost no part in the post-exilic thought. One writer only, the author of the magnificent missionary tract, the Book of Jonah, took it up and urged it. Apart from this the idea waited till the sufferings of the Ideal Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth, enabled men to read the prophet's words in their light. They nevertheless stand as one of the profoundest glimpses ever obtained by a human mind into the great truth of the social oneness of man, and of the great fact in this social fabric which we call humanity that it is along the nerves of suffering and of sacrifice that the redeeming influences of the higher life are conveyed.

Jeremiah and the Second Isaiah were two men unusually endowed with the power of thought and with sympathetic religious insight. To trace the influence of the exile upon the outward organization of Israel's religion other personages must be studied. The first of these is Ezekiel.

Ezekiel was a priest of a sufficiently prominent family so that Nebuchadrezzar had selected him for deportation with the first body of exiles in 598. Five years later he became a prophet and before the city fell in 586 he had won a commanding position by his utterances. Among the exiles at Tel Abib he urged the same principles and attitudes of mind which Jeremiah was urging in Jerusalem. After the city fell he continued for some fifteen years to be the counselor and comforter of the exiles, and before his death drew up a new plan for the reconstruction of the political and religious life of Israel, when the opportunity should come to return. We find his plan in Ezek., chaps. 40-48.

In studying Ezekiel's plan one is at first surprised to see how much detail is given concerning the temple and its ritual. These things assume in his book an importance which seems to bring religion back from the regions of the heart where Jeremiah had placed it, to the realm of outer ceremonies. It should be remembered, however, that in Ezekiel the afflatus of the prophet was translated through the education and traditions of a priest. It must also be remembered that the marriage between prophetic ideals and ritualistic requirement had been begun in the middle of the preceding century by the authors of the Deuteronomic law. It had been perceived, perhaps, by Isaiah the son of Amoz himself, that the world was not ready for a spiritual religion without ritual, and so the Deuteronomic legislator or legislators had drawn up a code which reduced ritual to the smallest possible limits and eliminated its grossly immoral features.

It was upon this foundation that Ezekiel built, but he regulated certain details of the ritual with greater definiteness. Even Deuteronomy had permitted the menial work of the sanctuary, such as making music and slaying the sacrifices, to be performed by foreign slaves; Ezekiel directed that this should no longer be so, and out of the descendants of the priests of the old country

shrines he legislated into existence the class called Levites (see Ezek. 44:8-13).

Some seventy years later Ezekiel's example was followed by another priest who compiled the code of holiness (Lev., chaps. 17-26), and fifty years later still, by another who composed the main body of the Priestly Document of the Pentateuch.

In the period between 621, when Josiah introduced his reform, and the exile, the struggle to secure the observance of the Deuteronomic law had been very severe. Jeremiah and his contemporaries had not only had to work against the superstitions of the common people who inhabited the outlying towns in which shrines existed, but also against the self-interest of powerful priesthoods whose livings were cut off by the reform. Large numbers of these priests had been carried into exile. No doubt such of them as were not attached to the Deuteronomic reform lost their hold upon the faith of their fathers and were merged in the heathen life about them. Some of them, however, even from the country shrines, chastened by the great disaster of exile became, probably, converts to the reform. These priests were the guardians of ancient traditions of ritual as these traditions had been handed down in various shrines, and in the Holiness Code and the Priestly Document many of these old traditions found literary and legislative form. The pious exiles who penned them were careful to mold them to the new spirit. All features which had fostered the sensual practices of the high places were eliminated. The ritual finally presented was a ritual purged by prophetic insight; it made the social corruption against which the prophets had inveighed a crime.

Soon after 450 B.C. (scholars differ at present as to the exact date) Ezra brought the new law from Babylonia and with Nehemiah's aid induced the people in solemn assembly to bind themselves to keep it. In this way the exile gave to Israel the law. It terminated the period of the prophets, and inaugurated the period of the Pentateuch. The great ideals for which the prophets had striven had, when reinforced by the disasters of the exile, purified the ritual, but for the mass their ideal of religion as a thing of the heart had been abandoned. Religion was a matter of

external rule. In individual souls, however, the old ideal was cherished as the Book of Job and Pss. 50 and 51 witness.

In spite, however, of the theory of religion which underlay the adoption of the ritual law, the situation was such that it could not undo the prophetic work altogether. Even in Palestine itself many lived too far from the temple to often share in its services, and there were many who continued to live in Babylonia and other distant lands. These were compelled to make their religion to some extent a thing of the heart. They could observe many of the legal rules and could read and meditate upon the law, but their sacrifices were for the most part necessarily sacrifices of the heart. In spite, therefore, of the rebuilding of the temple Jeremiah's doctrine that religion was independent of the sanctuary was reinforced by the circumstances of the people.

The exile not only changed the organization of Israel's ritual, but it gave Judah a renovated social life. One has but to visit an excavation of an old Palestinian high place like that of Gezer and look upon the obscene emblems without number which were presented as offerings there, and which are themselves witness to the sacrifices of chastity which were continually made in those places in the name of religion, to realize what sinks of corruption every high place in Palestine was down to the year 621. The temple at Jerusalem was no exception to this rule as II Kings 23:7 testifies. The reform of Josiah had, no doubt, checked these corrupting influences for a time, but Ezekiel bears witness to the fact (Ezek. 8:1 ff.) that such worship was not suppressed. No doubt it continued to be practiced by the poor who were left in the land, for we learn from Isa. 65:3, 4, 11 that in the early days after the exile other old practices were still maintained. As, however, the new Judah became reorganized and the new law had time to make itself felt, all this was corrected. These old social sores were healed; the fountains of corruption dried up and, while lapses from morality no doubt occurred, as they do in all lands, there was a great difference in the general social level in this respect in the days after the exile. Thus the exile profoundly affected theology, ritual, and morals—the theory of religion, the practice of worship, and the application of religion to life.

So deeply did the exile cut into the national life, so wonderful did the resuscitation of the nation seem, that the memory of it lingered long to color with bitterness or thankfulness the sentiments of later years—bitterness if the thought centered on the persecutors, thankfulness if it centered on the gracious deliverance Yahweh had wrought. Happily thoughts of the last-mentioned variety generally prevailed. We have but one psalm like the 137th with its pathetic beginning and bitter ending, while there are several which express the other sentiment. Thus Ps. 85:1:

Yahweh, thou hast loved thy land,
Thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob.

Similarly Ps. 124:6 ff.:

Blessed be Yahweh,
Who did not give us a prey to their teeth!
Our soul has escaped like a bird from a fowler's snare;
The snare is broken and we have escaped.

Also Ps. 126:1 ff.:

When Yahweh brought back the captivity of Zion
We were like them that dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter
And our tongue with singing.

On the whole the memories of the exile seem to have deepened Jewish appreciation of Yahweh's goodness and to have contributed to a sense of gratitude for divine mercies, which must often have been the basis of consecration to divine service.

Two other influences of the Babylonian exile upon Hebrew religion should briefly be noted. In Babylonia the Hebrews came in contact with a fascinating mythological literature. However much they might be offended by its mythology, the subject-matter of such poems as the creation epic and the Gilgamesh epic greatly attracted them. That these had an effect even during the exile itself is shown by the influence of the Babylonian Creation epic upon the Priestly writer's account of the creation in Gen., chap. 1, and by the fact that he adopted the account of the flood. The flood story was not so significant, however, as it had made its way westward centuries before and been given to the Hebrews

by J². These Epics were destined in the post-exilic days to exert a great influence. Poets like the author of Job (see Job 3:8, 9:13, and 26:12, 13) and Psalmists, such as the author of Ps. 89 (see vs. 10), found in this material some of their most telling illustrations. As time went on, too, an allegorical application of these stories had, as Gunkel has shown, an important influence in shaping the apocalyptic expectations of the Jews, leading them to believe that, as the present heaven and earth were created through conflict, upheaval, and struggle, so the new heaven and the new earth must be inaugurated by a similar conflict with the supreme power of evil, and by a supernatural cataclysm. Thus in a remote, yet direct, way the exile helped to transform the messianic expectations of the Jews from the simple character in which they had been held by the prophets to the supernatural character that they take on in the apocalyptic literature.

In still another way the exile exerted an influence upon Israel for many centuries. This was through the establishment of a permanent and prosperous colony of Jews in Babylonia. Even at the early date of the exile the Hebrew evinced that striking aptitude for business which has characterized him since. Many who had been transported to Babylonia entered into business there. The documents found in the business archives of Nippur reveal many Jewish names among the business men of the Persian period. These men were faithful to their religion, but were too prosperous to go back to Palestine. For fifteen hundred years from their transportation by Nebuchadrezzar these Hebrew communities in Babylonia were known as the *Goliuth* or "Captivity." That there were students of the law among them, we have already seen. In the days of Zechariah this "Captivity" was already contributing to Jerusalem silver and gold (see Zech. 6:10, 11). In the time of Nehemiah, Ezra and the law came from the "Captivity." Such gifts were but the earnest of many which were to follow. In the time of Herod the Great, Hillel, another great teacher of the law, was given by Babylonia to Jerusalem. Interested in all that pertained to their race and religion, these wealthy Babylonian Jews developed schools of the law that influenced the whole Jewish world, giving finally to their church the Talmud in

what is, perhaps, its most influential form, the "Babylonian Talmud."

Perhaps no single event in Hebrew history influenced her religion more deeply than the Babylonian exile. Of course the exodus from Egypt and the covenant with Yahweh were more fundamental, but the Babylonian exile helped more than any succeeding event to bring these earlier events to their legitimate spiritual fruitage.