

CHAPTER X

EXILE

Peasants in Judea reconstructed their narrow lives. They trudged a thousand kilometers to the land of their exile. As Isaiah had warned long ago their fine raiment turned to rags. The women's unadorned hair and faces revealed their sisterhood with the peasants whom they had despised. At last they who had so proudly dominated the narrow, hilly streets of Jerusalem came to the great city of Babylon.

The most magnificent city of the Near East lay flat and rectangular beside the meandering Euphrates. It was surrounded by massive double walls of burnt or sun dried bricks. The Ishtar Gate towered twelve meters above the wide processional street. It gleamed with hundreds of blue-enameled plaques on which marched bas-reliefs of bulls and dragons. The marvelous hanging gardens, classed by later generations as one of the seven wonders of the world, filled the rooftops with waving greenery. Beyond rose the lofty tower of Babel, reconstructed by Nebuchadnezzar. It rose in terraces beside the walled temple of Marduk, chief of the Babylonian gods.

To the Babylonian commoners and the aristocrats of the city the ziggurat was a constant reminder that well-being depended on the good will of Marduk. Good will was bought only by righteousness and importunate subservience. To the dismayed newcomers from Judea it must have flaunted the bitter question. Why had their God, the almighty God of David and Jerusalem, abandoned his people?

The hand of God was still upon them for good. Unlike the Assyrians, who had scattered the ten tribes of Israel a hundred and twenty-five years before, Nebuchadnezzar chose to keep his captives in and near Babylon. There he could benefit from their skills. He permitted them to settle together in certain neighborhoods, to acquire houses and to engage in trade.

The stubborn priests of David's city quickly seized upon this policy as a straw of hope. With no basis but their own smugness they promised King Jehoiakin's swift return to Jerusalem. Fed with this false confidence a faction of Jews rebelled against their captors. The uprising was promptly quashed by the Babylonians. Jehoiakin was thrown into prison for his part in the revolt.

From Jerusalem the aged Jeremiah wrote with infinite yearning but with firmness to his captive kinsmen:

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; 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. (Jeremiah 29:4,5,7)

He told them they must reconcile themselves to seventy years of exile. But the more comfortable belief in Jerusalem's inviolability would not die. The wise advice was only partially heeded.

EZEKIEL

Five restless years passed after that first deportation before the final destruction of Jerusalem. Then in a vision the captive of Ezekiel was called by God to dissolve the false attitudes of his people. He was to raise their concepts to a higher, spiritual plane. High-strung and sensitive, Ezekiel recoiled from the responsibility, the unpopularity and the pain, mental and physical. Apparently in his distress he even lost the use of his voice. However, God reminded him that the watchman who fails to warn of wrongdoing brings the guilt upon himself. Eventually his influence in the development of the Hebrews would rank close to that of Jeremiah and Isaiah.

At the age of thirty (the customary age for entering active priesthood) Ezekiel took up his ministry. His first task was to convince the blind exiles that Jerusalem was destined to fall.

In the Hebrew settlement of Babylon he sat on the ground. On a clay tile before him he drew a map of Jerusalem. Like a boy playing at war he built a ramp about it and laid siege to it with makeshift toy weapons. Later he lay in the dust day after day feeding himself with meals cooked over cow dung and sipping water sparingly, pantomiming long weeks of famine. He dug a tunnel beneath the wall of his house and emerged from it with his belongings, like one bent on secret escape.

Shrill crowds must have gathered, taunting and jeering but plying him with questions, as he knew they would. The bizarre drama, appealing to their curiosity penetrated their stubbornly closed minds. Through many such illustrations Ezekiel silently delivered God's message of the folly of rebellion and the doom, through siege and famine, of Jerusalem. Doom not because the God of Judah was helpless nor unjust but because the Hebrews had refused to obey their God.

In a vision Ezekiel learned of the utter destruction of Jerusalem. In that hour he turned whole-heartedly to God's guidance for survival of the increasing numbers of Jewish captives in Babylon.

Like Isaiah and Jeremiah he perceived the insincerity of outward actions and the wayward motives and essence of human behavior. He expressed what he saw in vivid, fantastic word-pictures. He freely used Near Eastern symbolism understood by his hearers but difficult for us to decipher. When certain elders came to him for instruction he decried their insincerity:

And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling block of their iniquity before their face: should I be inquired of, at all by them? ...I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols;...(Ezekiel 14:2-4)

Never far from Ezekiel's thoughts was the beloved temple complex in Jerusalem where he had grown up. His acute perception revealed to him the sinful situation there. The "ancients of Israel" inwardly worshipping in darkest secrecy "every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel," even while surrounding themselves with pious clouds of incense to the glory of Israel's God. The worshipping women were actually as crude and superstitious as the Mesopotamian idolaters. Even in the sacred inner court the rising cult of sun worship was avidly studied. In flaming color and a whirl of motion he saw the cherubims of the Holy of Holies, with the glory of the Lord above them, rise, hover and depart eastward (toward Babylon) from the thought-defiled temple.

In Ezekiel's clear revelation God is patient, good and unswervingly just. Salvation is always at hand for those who will listen. He boldly refuted the depressing old adage (as had Jeremiah),

...The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. (Ezekiel 18:2)

and comfortingly taught:

...The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways, and live? (Ezekiel 18:20,23)

The fall of Jerusalem and the apparent humiliation of her God had been watched with cruel satisfaction by Judah's traditional enemies. Many had hastened to plunder the unprotected land. This situation must be reversed. With clear and eloquent detail, in which we glimpse the depth and breadth of Ezekiel's experience and learning, he assured his people that the Lord would visit punishment on each of those nations. They would recognize the glory and all-power of Israel's God.

Ezekiel gave to his people what wisdom and guidance they would accept. Then he turned their attention toward their ultimate goal.

ISRAEL'S NEW TEMPLE

Although the Hebrews had scarcely touched the fringes of knowledge of divine power in nearly a thousand years, no other nation had approached even their imperfect concept of I AM. Ezekiel realized that the battered, purified Chosen People must be destined to pick up their tools and carry on. He echoed Jeremiah's promise of a tender shepherd:

For thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. (Ezekiel 34:11,12,23)

In a vision Ezekiel received additional reassurance of Israel's continuing vitality. Scattered in a valley, he saw the dry bones of his people. When, at God's command, he preached to them the bones took on flesh and rose up.

With this divine assurance of the stability of Israel (the name now stands for the spiritual identity of the Jews) and with his sharp perception of God's unchanging goodness, he placed before his people the spiritual image of the ideal temple for which they must strive. This new temple, revealed to him in visions, stood on a lofty mountain.

And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice was like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with his glory . . .and, behold, the glory of the Lord filled the house. (Ezekiel 43:2,5)

From beside the altar there flowed a river of clear water. It deepened, widened and flowed to the sea. And "everything shall live whither the river cometh." (Ezekiel 47:9) Along the banks of this sacred river grew trees whose perennial fruits were for food and their leaves for healing. The stylized, perfect city which would support the temple would be called "The Lord is there." There would be no king. The new temple would be ruled, under God's direction, by the highest level of priesthood.

Ezekiel served his people for twenty-two years of their captivity. His imagery as well as his teaching would stamp an indelible imprint on both Jewish and Christian thought in centuries to come. He and Jeremiah together freed the Jews from the burden of past and tribal guilt. They pointed to the need for national and individual responsibility. Life without a temple, without a material cult, was beginning to have real and vital meaning. In prosperity or in captivity, Israel must carry the burden of her mission.

THE PRIESTLY CODE

The quiet search for truth continued among the priests in Babylon. Gathering in small groups and in private homes they discussed the meaning of their experience in the light of Israel's history. The prophets of Israel and Judah had laid the groundwork for their progress. The captives, having perhaps by hastily snatched scrolls and certainly by years of painstaking memorization preserved the old records. They now found in them new meanings and applications.

The phenomenal strength of the children of Israel in the days of Moses had lain in their solid unity of thought. This was the key, the priests realized, to future greatness in Israel. This unity must be restored. Toward this goal, they firmly reinstated in the captive community the old rituals: the washing of hands, the careful choosing of foods and, above all, the rite of circumcision which set them apart from the Babylonians.

Not to distort history but to keep intact and visible the chain of Israel's acknowledged dependence on God, they retouched or reedited much of the earlier material of the Bible. The book of Leviticus, detailing the meticulous proprieties which should govern the Jew's approach to God, stems largely from this time. Its constant admonition is, "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy." (Leviticus 19:2)

In the new concept of a loving God the ancient flood saga was enriched with the promise of the rainbow:

And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood: ...I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. (Genesis 9:11,13)

The symbolic intricacies of detail expressed in the Priestly Code ("P") are unfortunately lost to us through distance in time and difference of native idiom.

CREATION

Faced by the need of their people, from the understanding slowly acquired through the centuries, the inspired priests perceived the highest, most spiritual concept of the creation of earth and man that the world has yet received. It towers above the anthropomorphic "J" account of Solomon's time. The scaffolding of the very ancient Mesopotamian epic of beginnings still shows dimly but how majestic the vision has become.

Non-existent are Marduk and his evil, clashing hordes. God is the only Presence.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1:1-3)

By his word alone, the uttering of a sacred idea, the concept of the firmament was created, of the dry land, grass and herbs and fruit trees, of sun and moon and stars, of creatures moving in the waters and flying above the earth, of cattle and creeping things and the beasts of the earth. Finally Man was created, not from depravity to serve the gods as the pagan epic taught, but

...God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:26,27)

These divine acts of creation were divided symbolically over six days. On the seventh, the God of all existence rested. The stark spiritual grandeur of the account is punctuated by the liturgical refrain, and God saw that it was good.

The ancient Sabbath of Israel took on renewed deep meaning for the Jews. On each seventh day, every loyal Jew must join his God in the quiet contemplation of a creation that is wholly good.

Not through thoughtless ceremony but by constant awareness of their God the Jewish people learned to face the world with the strength of unity.

SECOND ISAIAH

Taking a leading role among the priests during the exile was a prophet who spoke with such selfless wisdom that no trace of his human identity has been found. The deep, spiritual love that motivated him lives to this day. It cleanses the chaos of human fear and sorrow with his knowledge of divine goodness. He was clearly influenced by Isaiah, who had lived some hundred years earlier. So his writings were appended to those of the former prophet, as chapters forty to fifty-five. We know him simply as Second Isaiah.

In strong contrast to Ezekiel's harshness and pessimism, he spent himself to bring courage and hope to his people:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1, 2)

How easy it would have been for the children who had never seen the rough mountains and rushing streams of Judah or the solemn stone walls of Jerusalem's temple, to slip into the worship of the colorful gods of Babylon. For these young people, Isaiah tore away the elaborate pagan sham. How does an idol, the emblem of a god, come into being? Isaiah pointed out that an ordinary craftsman fashions the god with his hammer and his arms. He cuts down a tree which the rains have nourished and burns part of it to warm himself and part of it to bake his bread. Of the rest he carves a god and falls down before it imploring "Deliver me; for thou art my god!" Isaiah warned,

Thus saith the Lord, thy redeemer, and he that formed thee from the womb, I am the Lord that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself; (Isaiah 44:24)

Second Isaiah pointed far into the future for man's understanding of the Creator. He saw for the Jews an abiding task. It would be a wilderness journey in which God himself, as a tender shepherd, would prepare the way through a desert bursting into bloom at their passing. Israel must build a new, purely spiritual Jerusalem. In it God's rule would be known and acknowledged throughout the world. The task would be ages long and unspeakably difficult. It would be accompanied by scorn and oppression. But Israel's reward would be beyond declaration:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. (Isaiah 42:1)

And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of

Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary:... I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord God will help me;... (Isaiah 50:4, 6, 7)

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief:...he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.(Isaiah 53:3,12)

These so-called Servant Songs would later be adopted by the early Christian church as heralding the life of Jesus the Christ. But such specific prophecy in the modern sense of the word was foreign in Isaiah's time. Present day scholars understand the Songs as a fluid expression of the repeated role, past, present and future, in all its tragedy, of the ideal figure of Israel. The task must be based in Jerusalem. The chain of revelation of the Holy One of Israel might be recognized by all nations.

Years later, probably after the dedication of the new temple in Jerusalem (515 B.C.E.), Second Isaiah's students added eleven more chapters to the Isaiah scroll. Chapters 56 to 66 give the entire book the sweep of divine prophecy (inspired teaching), from the realization of a new Messiah to come, through the Servant Songs, to a radiant glimpse of life in the perfect, spiritual city of the future, New Jerusalem:

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord. (Isaiah 65:17, 25)

DANIEL

Loyalty to God was not confined to the priesthood. Favorite among children are the stories of the young exiles, Daniel and his three friends. Some modern scholars doubt the tales. They seem not to have been recorded in their present form until nearly three hundred years later. Then the desperately oppressed Jews were in dire need of heroes to look up to. Nevertheless their story threads through the history of the exile.

In one of Nebuchadnezzar's early raids on Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were hauled off to the dreaded wickedness of Babylon. Lest the local gods be offended they were promptly given Babylonian names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach

and Abednego. Along with other well-featured lads they were chosen for special education. They were to learn to serve with distinction in the court of the king. To keep them in top condition they were assigned a special diet, the food of the king himself.

Here was a problem! The young Hebrews knew well the dietary laws that had bound their people since the dangerous days of the wilderness wanderings. Any beast with a cloven hoof which chewed its cud was good for food. But the camel, the hare, the cone and the swine were unclean. Fish with scales might be eaten but not the aquatic creatures without scales and fins. Nor were birds of prey to be considered food. How were the lads to know the ingredients of the king's delicious dinners? Better to discard them entirely, they decided, than to transgress the laws of Judah. With friendly reasoning they begged their steward to bring them only vegetables and water. Won by their courage and goodwill he disobeyed his king, risking his life to do their bidding. When their course of instruction was finished King Nebuchadnezzar was delighted with their health, alertness and wisdom. The four were classed among the court wise men.

THE FORGOTTEN DREAM

One of the duties of the courtiers was the interpretation of dreams. This was looked upon as divine communications. Daniel and his friends were not present one morning when the king awoke from a dream that had left him deeply troubled. His astrologers and wise men gathered only to hear their king confess that the dream, which they must interpret, had slipped his memory.

Pandemonium broke loose. Never had a king made such an unreasonable demand! Nebuchadnezzar, thoroughly angered, ordered that all his wise men be put to death.

In this crisis the four Hebrew friends prayed for guidance. The answer came to Daniel in a night vision. Pausing only to give thanks to the God of his fathers he hurried to the king. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed, Daniel told him, of a great image of a man made of gold, silver and brass with feet part of iron and part of clay and this image had been crushed by a great stone shaped without hands. Declaring that this knowledge came from his God, not from his own powers, he explained that the man was the Kingdom of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold, then came weaker rulers and a division, iron and clay. The kingdom was to be crushed by the great God of heaven, who would set up an everlasting kingdom.

In awe of such wisdom Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the power of Daniel's all-knowing God. He elevated Daniel to the position of ruler over the province of Babylon.

THE FIERY FURNACE

Another trial of their faith awaited the Hebrew lads. In gratitude to his gods Nebuchadnezzar had a great golden image set up outside the city walls. Whenever the band struck up everyone must fall down and worship that image or be cast into a fiery furnace.

For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego there was only one law: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. With considerable satisfaction, certain jealous Babylonians rushed to the king to report that the three captives had not bowed down to the golden image. Nebuchadnezzar gave them one more chance to worship and escape the furnace sneering,

...and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. (Daniel 3:15-18)

The three young men were hustled off and pushed into the roaring furnace. Then to the astonished king it seemed that four men were walking in the midst of the flames. The fourth had an awesome, unearthly quality, like a son of the gods. The king hurried to the mouth of the furnace. He called to the men to come out. Before him and his astounded courtiers the three Hebrews emerged unhurt. Not even the smell of fire was on their garments! In awe of them and of their God, Nebuchadnezzar raised them to honored positions in the province. He sent out a decree that no one in his realm, on pain of death, might speak against the God of the Jews.

PRIDE'S PENALTY

Years later, Daniel's God-given wisdom was again called upon to interpret a dream of his captor-king. Nebuchadnezzar himself tells the story:

I Nebuchadnezzar was at rest in mine house, and flourishing in my palace: I saw a dream which made me afraid,...Then came in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers: and I told the dream before them; but they did not make known unto me the interpretation thereof. But at the last Daniel came in before me, whose name was Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods:...(Daniel 4:4-8)

For an hour Daniel studied and prayed. Then he revealed that the dream was a warning. Unless the king became more humble before the most High, and more merciful toward the poor, he would be removed from his kingdom for seven years.

A year passed and again Nebuchadnezzar spoke as he walked in his palace, the warning quite forgotten:

Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty? While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken: The kingdom is departed from thee. (Daniel 4:30, 31)

The mighty king became insane. Since the disease was mysterious and greatly feared he was driven from men to live like an animal in the fields. For seven years he was absent from his throne. At last he lifted up his eyes to heaven and understood the dominion of the most High, and the helplessness of man. His reason returned. His counselors sought him out and he was gladly reinstated in his kingdom.

Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase. (Daniel 4:37)

We have no evidence that Nebuchadnezzar actually turned from the worship of Marduk, who to him was the King of heaven. Daniel, by his understanding and by his loyalty to God, was able to raise the king's outlook into the higher reaches of his own faith. This gave him a deep respect for the God of the Hebrews.

A BIT OF HISTORY

The glorious reign of Nebuchadnezzar came to an end in the year 562 B.C.E.. He was followed on the throne by his son Evil-Merodach.

The exiled scribes had brought the historical record of Judah up to the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the captivity and the flight of many Israelites into Egypt. Then they closed the chronicle on a glad upbeat:

And it came to pass in the seven and thirtieth year of the captivity of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the seven and twentieth day of the month, that Evil-merodach king of Babylon in the year that he began to reign did lift up the head of Jehoiachin king of Judah out of prison; And he spake kindly to him, and set his throne above the throne of the kings that were with him in Babylon; (2 Kings 25:27,28)

What a thrill of excited hope it must have raced through the Hebrew quarters at this news of respect and friendship for their king! To most of them it must have signaled the promised end of their dreary exile.

But after two long years of waiting Evil-Merodach was murdered and hope very nearly died. The murderer reigned briefly and was finally succeeded by Nabonidus. He was to be the last king of the mighty Babylonian empire.

The new king was already an old man when he began to reign in 556 B.C.E. He preferred the dryer climate of Taima, a conquered Arabian city toward the west. He appointed his son Belshazzar, as co-regent in Babylon during his long absences. Unfortunately, Evil-Merodach's encouraging respect for the Jews was not shared by the new king.

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN

Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords. He drank wine before the thousand. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem. The king, his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them.

In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.
(Daniel 5:1, 3, 5)

Terrified, the king shouted for the astrologers, the Chaldean magicians and the soothsayers. Here was a riddle, the age-old test of a leader's ability, obviously propounded by the gods themselves. He dared not treat it lightly. In the manner of the times it was written without punctuation and without vowels. The astrologers and magicians could not discern the meaning.

Then the queen remembered Daniel in who was the "spirit of the holy gods." Called from his prayer and studies the elderly prophet strode into the great banquet hall. There the frightened disorderly crowd contrasted strangely with the serene dignity of the tall pillars. Chiding the king, reminding him that his father had been driven from man for his pride, Daniel pointed out:

Thou ...hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know:

and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified: And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. (Daniel 5:23,25)

With Daniel's scholarly knowledge of language and his broad awareness of international affairs, against the background of his constant reliance on divine guidance, the letters sorted themselves into meaning:

Mene: God had numbered and finished the Babylonian kingdom.

Tekel: The king had been weighed, as coins in the counting house, and had been found wanting.

Upharsin or Peres: this word had a double meaning and could be written in two ways. Its meaning, the Kingdom of Babylon would be divided and given to the Persians.

CYRUS

Danger was very close to the gates of Babylon.

About fourteen years earlier a minor Persian king named Cyrus. He had rebelled against the king of the Medes. Three years later he had captured Ecbatan, capital of Media. In another three years the fabulously wealthy King Croesus of Lydia had surrendered to him. By the year 545 B.C.E., as Second Isaiah had foreseen, Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, had conquered all of Asia Minor. He was a brilliant military tactician. He had earned a reputation for reasonable and humane treatment of his foes. He also had an unusual talent for evoking loyalty and cooperation among his multiracial troops and subjects. At the very time of Belshazzar's feast, Cyrus' mighty army was marching down the road to Babylon.

At last aware of the danger, King Nabonidus hurried back to his capital city. But he was too late. His subjects were very angry with their king.

Nabonidus' mother had been a priestess in the temple of the moon-god in Haran. The king had devoted his attention to this god, reconstructing the ancient buildings instead of paying homage to Marduk of Babylon.

Among the great religious festivals of Babylon was the New Year celebration. In it the drama of the defeat of the winter god and the rebirth of the kingship that was reenacted. At that time the figure of the god Marduk emerged from his house. He was carried in colorful, triumphant procession through the city streets lined with delighted citizens. It was the time for merrymaking, dancing and feasting. Yet year after year King Nabonidus absented himself from the festival. Without the king to take the hand of the god there could be no winter death drama, no celebration. Marduk must stay in his house. The people were cheated of their merrymaking and the priests of their moment of glory.

The people of Babylon were no more loyal to Nabonidus than he was to them

When Cyrus' officers arrived at the ornate gates of the city they were swung open to him gladly as a liberator.

DANIEL IN THE LION'S DEN

Bible students surmise that Gobrias may also have held the very common Persian name Darius. This would make him the "King Darius" who, searching in the conquered city for a man to trust, found no one more solidly dependable than the Hebrew captive Daniel. Daniel was therefore appointed as chief president of the land. The lesser court officials seethed with fury.

However these officials knew Daniel better than Darius did. Cleverly, and with flattering words, they brought to the king a petition they had prepared for him to sign:

...that whosoever shall ask a petition of any god or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions. (Daniel 6:7)

Convinced that such a measure would glorify the new Persian government, Darius signed the document. The schemers hurried away to Daniel's house. They timed their visit well. As they expected, he was kneeling before an open window that faced toward Jerusalem. He was quietly continuing his unwavering habit of praying and giving thanks to his God three times a day.

Back to the king they went with their malicious report. Darius, angered at having fallen into their trap, "labored until the going down of the sun to deliver him." But he found no way. The laws of the Medes and the Persians were inflexible and irreversible. The king, grieving, ordered that Daniel be thrown to the lions. After a sleepless night,

the king arose very early in the morning, and went in haste unto the den of lions. And when he came to the den, he cried with a lamentable voice unto Daniel: and the king spake and said to Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live forever. My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me....So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God.
(Daniel 6:19-23)

The treacherous officials were put to death. The power of Israel's God was recognized in the new regime.