

CHAPTER XI

RETURN

By the year 538 B.C.E. Cyrus the Great was ruler over the largest empire that had ever been known. It stretched from the Indus River to the Aegean Islands and down to the borders of Egypt. To his throne he brought not only military skill and talent for governing but a deep respect for the gods of all peoples. He saw in them the servants of his own Persian god.

Coming to Babylon soon after its surrender he found that Nabonidus, foreseeing defeat, had gathered the gods of the surrounding towns into the city. These King Cyrus promptly sent back to their homes so that their people might not remain unprotected:

...that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdoms, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.
(2 Chronicles 36:22, 23)

What a day of gladness for Judah! Second Isaiah gave eloquent expression to his people's joy:

Sing, O ye heavens; for the Lord hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel. (Isaiah 44:23)

SHESH-BAZZAR

Our knowledge of events after Cyrus' proclamation comes chiefly from records found in the ruins of the Persian courts. However much has been lost, jumbled or was never written down. We can only try to piece together the following years.

The man who was chosen to lead the "Second Exodus" of Israel back to the Promised Land was a prince of the house of David. He had the Babylonian name Shesh-bazaar. Cyrus not only appointed him governor of Judah but commanded that the temple vessels and sacred cultic instruments (all of which had been meticulously listed in the treasurer's house) be delivered to him. Moreover he gave orders that building materials for a temple, of specified dimensions, should be provided by the neighboring governors.

We know of no strong, dedicated leaders in that first return save Shesh-bazzar himself. There must have been deep soul-searching among the exiles when the call went forth. Many who had mourned for Jerusalem and fondly dreamed of restoring the Lord's house now found that their real interests lay in prosperous Babylon. These people gave money and words of blessing but remained in their comfortable homes. There were elderly captives who had never become reconciled to life in a strange land. There were many young people born in captivity, straining toward some sort of Utopia depicted by their elders. With these and a few dedicated priests Shesh-bazzar set out on the long journey to the Holy City.

What heartbreaking desolation they found! Samaria had been repopulated by the Assyrians when they conquered it. But the land of Judah had been left by the Babylonians with only a thin sprinkling of survivors to carry on. The fields, neglected for over half a century, lay choked with weeds and thorn bushes. The city homes, useless to the sparse population, sagged amid the tumbled rubble.

Nevertheless, Shesh-bazzar's urgent leadership set the returned exiles to working with a will. They tore the invading shrubs from their fields, They leveled the mounds of rubbish in the city and salvaging stones for their new houses. With it all they found time to lay the foundations of the temple of the God of Israel.

And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because he is Good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. (Ezekiel 3:11)

The noise of their voices was heard far off. It was not all the sound of triumph. Many of the older ones, with childhood memories of the glories of Solomon's great temple, wailed aloud in their grief and disappointment in the unpretentious substitute for their temple.

HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

King Cyrus died in Babylon and Darius I became ruler over the Persian Empire. High on a cliff above the road leading to modern Hamadan (ancient Echbatan) in Iran an imposing bas-relief monument still proclaims the greatness of this king. It has inscriptions in the three official languages of the time, Babylonian, Old Persian and Elamite.

In Judah the returned exiles still struggled for a foothold after eighteen years of misfortunes, poor crops and poverty. The auspicious time for continuing the building of the temple never seemed to come.

At last the basic problem became clear to two young prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, in the little colony of Jerusalem.

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, saying, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste? Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified. (Haggai 1:1, 4,8)

Zerubbabel was a grandson of Jehoiachin, a nephew of Shesh-bazzar, of the house of David. He was a man of immense vitality and organizing ability. Joshua was equally bold and dedicated. Together they imbued the returned exiles with a will to continue the building of the temple. Enthusiasm mounted high not only among the exiles but among those who had not left the land, many of whom dwelt in Samaria. These came to Zerubbabel saying, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God, as ye do: and we do sacrifice unto him."

But they were intermixed with Samaritans, descendants of the pagan foreigners brought in by conquering Assyrians. What did they know of Israelite history, of the years of trial and purification in Babylon and of this final triumph of restoring the temple? Zerubbabel and Joshua abruptly and disdainfully refused their help. The insulted people withdrew in anger. The rift grew which, nearly six hundred years later, St. John would mention to his readers, "For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans." (John 4:9)

Annoyed at the prospect of power arising in Jerusalem, the governor of Samaria wrote immediately to King Darius. He challenged the right of the returned exiles to build. The Persian king caused a thorough search to be made. The cylinder bearing Cyrus' seal was eventually found, ordering that the temple be built.

Freed at last from interference the work progressed quickly. In March of the year 515 B.C.E. the new temple was completed. The children of the captivity dedicated the building with great joy. They celebrated the Passover in careful accord with all the laws of Moses.

The returned exiles held claim to a miniature "land of Judah" some forty kilometers in length. They had a house for the glory of their God, a ruler of the Davidic line and a high priest of acceptable lineage. Small beginnings but in the eyes of the young prophet Zechariah the stage was set for the brilliant return of David's kingdom. Exulting with new hope he cried to his people,

...This is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts. For who hath despised the day of small things? For they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hands of Zerubbabel... Behold the man whose name is THE BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. (Zechariah 4:6, 10; 6:12)

Zechariah proclaimed that those unforgettable days of the siege of Jerusalem, of its fall, of the burning of the temple should be remembered not with pain but with "joy and gladness, and with cheerful feasts." They were the punishment that led to glad reform, to the love of truth and peace, to the time when,

In those days, the Lord of hosts declares, ten men from nations of every language shall seize the skirt of a single Jew, saying, 'We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'
(Zechariah 8:23) (Moffat translation)

ESTHER

When King Darius died in the year 486 B.C.E. the Persian throne passed to his son Ahasuerus. Unfortunately few records of this era have so far been found. It is not surprising that we have no corroboration for the story of Judah's beloved heroine, Esther. It is a story which, like that of Daniel, did not come into prominence until centuries later when the example of selfless loyalty was sorely needed.

Ahasuerus was insensitive and sensual but he was an energetic builder of lovely palaces. Only traces remain of the soaring columns, broad staircases decorated with bas-reliefs in colored glazed brick and figures of beasts and flowers exquisitely carved in marble which graced his dwellings. Amid this beauty, softened by swaying curtains of white, blue and green cloth, moved the king's elegant courtiers. Their rich attire reflected the multicultural nature of the kingdom. Each proudly held to his native pattern of dress. The Medes wore tall, rounded bonnets. The Persians had high, stiff hats and long, flowing sleeves with meticulously elaborate pleating. Others wore brilliantly colored and delicately embroidered robes. All had their hair and beards carefully curled, and their manners calculated to flatter their powerful sovereign.

During a sumptuous feast for his courtiers in the winter palace Ahasuerus summoned his beautiful wife. She refused to appear before the drunken crowd. The angry king not only banished her but also sent a message to all the men of his kingdom urging them to demand obedience from their wives. Then he called for a bevy of beautiful girls from which to choose her successor.

Among the townfolk of Shushan lived a young Hebrew girl named Esther. She had been raised by her uncle Mordecai. Esther was selected as one of the maidens to be

groomed for the king. When she came before him he was so taken with her loveliness that he chose her as his queen.

Mordecai warned Esther as she entered her new life in the palace never to mention her Jewish ancestry. Throughout the land, but especially in the palace, the Jews were adamantly hated. They were different and drew apart from others. They insisted on their own strict dietary laws. They refused to work on the last day of the week. Most annoying, they exhibited integrity and ability in court and in commerce far superior to the other courtiers. One of the palace officials, a man named Haman, was especially incensed at Mordecai. He had refused to bow down when Haman passed by.

Goaded by hatred, Haman aimed high. He would not only destroy Mordecai but all the Jews in the land. With a group of cronies he cast lots to determine what day would be auspicious for a vindictive, bloody massacre. Then he drew up a document ordering that on that day all Jews should be exterminated and their possessions confiscated. He borrowed the imperial seal ring and sent the proclamation throughout the land.

Mordecai sent word to Esther within the palace. She must persuade the king to annul the decree immediately. However Esther replied that she had not been called into the king's presence for thirty days. Death was the penalty for approaching him unsummoned in the inner court. Only if the king held out his golden scepter in clemency would the intruder live.

Back came a reminder from Mordecai "...and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Esther and her maidens fasted for three days. Then, arrayed in her prettiest robes, she walked into the inner court to face the unpredictable king. It just so happened that her frightened beauty pleased him! Wondering what had driven her to such foolhardiness he extended the royal scepter, asking,

...What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request?
it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom. (Esther 5:3)

Esther merely asked that he and Haman dine with her that evening. Haman was giddy with self-importance. At the feast, she requested that they return the following evening. On the second night Esther revealed to Ahasuerus proof of Mordecai's loyalty to the king, her own Jewish origin, and the vicious murder plot. Haman, blinded by terror, forgot certain rules of propriety; bring upon himself the king's wrath. He was hanged from the very gibbet he had prepared for Mordecai. Mordecai was elevated to a position of honor in the palace.

Nevertheless the law of the Nedes and the Persians had gone forth. The massacre could not be stopped. Could it be lessened? Messengers were soon speeding on camels, horses and mules to the far reaches of the land. Jews everywhere were given warning and encouragement to protect themselves.

The thirteenth day of the month Adar was a day of terrible slaughter. But not of the Jews! They fought with such courage and determination that their enemies fell by the thousands. The killing continued until every Jew was regarded with fear, respect and honor. The Jews took no booty.

This is the origin of the holiday feast of Purim (lots) which is still celebrated by the Jews in early spring with gaiety and noise and with the carrying of gifts to the poor. On that day the book of Esther is read in the synagogues while old and young rejoice that the Jewish nation has proved itself unconquerable and that the day will come when the senseless oppression of its people will cease.

NEHEMIAH

Whether or not Esther was a historical figure we know that Ahasuerus and his successor Artaxerxes continued to rule Jerusalem rather leniently through appointed governors. A curtain of silence falls after the finishing of the temple. With no strong leadership the temple routine limped along. The sacrifices, the singing, the teaching of the children by the prophets, all continued as Joshua and Zerubbabel had ordered it. However intermarriage with the pagan population was seriously dulling the lines of demarcation between them and the returned exiles. The inspiration gained in Babylon was slowly fading. Resentment and suspicion towards Judah grew among the neighboring governors.

Jerusalem's citizens banded together at last to build a city wall, sorely needed for protection against marauders. The mixed nations in Samaria wrote in alarm to Artaxerxes. If he permitted the "rebellious and the bad city" to be strengthened Jerusalem would soon cease to pay the required tolls and tributes which swelled the Persian king's coffers. Artaxerxes caused search to be made among the royal archives. Sure enough, Jerusalem's record had been one of stubbornness and insubordination. He decreed that the building must be stopped. The Samaritans went up in triumph, assuring the cessation of the work.

However the matter did not end there. In Artaxerxes' court one of the most dignified and trusted officers was the royal cupbearer who handed wine to the king. On his integrity his master's life might depend. In "Shushan the palace" this office was held by a Jew with the loyal old Israelite name Nehemiah. Born in captivity, he was one of those to whom Jerusalem was still the center of all reality. When his brother Hannah brought news of greed, social injustice and danger from robbers in the beloved city, Nehemiah blurted out his anxiety to the king. It was a risky thing to do, for the matter had already been settled by the Persian King. But Artaxerxes was moved to listen with sympathy. With Egypt always on the brink of rebellion, contentment in the fiery land of the Jews was important to him.

In the spring of 445 B.C.E., nearly ninety years after the abortive efforts of Sheshbazzar, Nehemiah set out for Jerusalem. He had been granted not only a leave of absence but large sums of money and letters of authority requiring materials from the neighboring governors.

Nehemiah approached this task without fanfare. Three days he spent sizing up the dissident groups within Jerusalem. Then, with carefully chosen companions and in secret, by moonlight, he examined the walls from the outside. He noticed the wide gaps in the stonework, the burned gates, the weed-tangled heaps of rocks which even the beast could not negotiate. At last he revealed to the priests and the nobles the royal permission to build the walls. To each ruling family was assigned the repairing of that portion nearest its own dwelling. With this incentive the people said with one accord, "Let us rise up and build."

Nehemiah wrote in his memoirs:

But it came to pass, that when Sanballat (of Samaria), and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it. Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them. (Nehemiah 4:7-9)

Half of his men he placed fully armed beside the laborers. The trumpeters stood always ready to sound the alarm. He records that neither he nor his servants nor the men of the guard put off their clothes during those tense days and nights, except for washing.

His task was lonely and trouble-haunted. In spite of their enthusiasm, the people wilted in their lack of physical strength before the great heaps of rubbish that must be removed. They trembled at the growing threats from their malicious neighbors. As the wall took shape Sanballat urged Nehemiah to meet with him on the plain of Ono, some distance from the protection of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah wrote:

And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you? (Nehemiah 6:3)

One day, when he stopped to visit with a friend, he was urged to take refuge in the temple because of a plot to kill him. Nehemiah realized that even his friend had been bribed by Sanballat to trick him into disgrace. Moreover he knew that kinsmen within the city reported his every move to Tobias the Ammonite.

Nevertheless, under his indomitable leadership "the people had a mind to work." The wall was finished with a speed that left their enemies amazed. But so much of the

city still lay in ruins that it was not a pleasant place to live in. The people drew lots to determine who should move into the city. Those who volunteered were greatly admired.

Selfishness and greed had become a way of life throughout Judah. The ruling class jostled for power. They forced the poor into ever-deeper debt, seizing their property, even their children, in payment of their excessive demands. In strong contrast to the accept ways, he drew for us a picture of his own public-spirited household:

There were at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, beside those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us. Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread (food allowance) of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people. (Neh. 5:17, 18)

Twelve years Nehemiah struggled to bring order into the disheveled city and to imbue into its people a higher sense of righteousness. At last his efforts bore fruit. Gradually the nobles raised their sights. They returned the confiscated land and freed their Hebrew slaves.

His leave of absence ended, Nehemiah left Jerusalem in 433 B.C.E. to return to his duties in Artaxerxes' court.

MALACHI

The roots of righteousness Nehemiah had planted in Jerusalem were frail. Backsliding was apparent almost immediately. Many scholars believe that it was at this time that Malachi took up the attempt to guide the wayward people.

Malachi exhorted the Jews to remember Esau whom the Lord "hated" in contrast to God's beloved Jacob, their ancestor. The people must turn back to true, glad service of the Lord in contrast to their stinted sacrifices:

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. (Malachi 3:10)

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3:1)

The Day of Judgment shall come that shall "burn as an oven." To the faithful, those who fear the Lord's name, the Son of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings.

The laws of Moses, guides to harmonious community living, must not be forsaken. That other great prophet Elijah, symbolic of the knowledge that only through still, trusting thought can God's guidance be received, must come to Judah before she can endure that dreadful day, the day of the Lord.

OBADIAH AND JOEL

During the decades of formative growth in Judah the concept of the Day of the Lord was changed subtly. Instead of the gradual winning of the dominion of righteousness hinted in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah, a new, less patient vision of the Day was taking shape. It was interpreted under varying circumstances. It sprang from the concept of God's sudden, cataclysmic destruction of all evil. At times it became not so much a day of vindication of righteous Judah as one of terrible retribution upon the enemies of God's people.

In this vein the minor prophet Obadiah proclaimed the sure destruction of Edom for its complacency. He even rejoiced at the downfall of Judah. He takes the matter clear back to the beginnings: to Esau, carnally-minded ancestor of Edom, and the spiritual supremacy of Jacob.

And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the Lord hath spoken it. (Obadiah 1:18)

Still vengeful but far more inspiring is the work of Joel, writing probably fifty years later. The Day of the Lord still looms as an appalling catastrophe. It is painted with the superb skill of an artist, whether he is describing the ravages of an actual plague of locusts, or, symbolically, the advance of an enemy from the north. Black though appearances may be, restoration is close at hand:

...for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; and who can abide it? Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.
(Joel 2:11-13)

NEHEMIAH'S RETURN

In the court of the Persian king, Nehemiah's beloved, stubborn Jerusalem weighed heavily on his mind. At last he obtained permission to return. And just in time! The situation had deteriorated rapidly.

Tobiah the Ammonite, with the priests' acquiescence, had moved into the temple itself. He was using one of the big storage rooms as his home. The Sabbath, so sacred among the Jews of the captivity, was disregarded. The marketplace bustled with activity. Peasants and animals laden with fish, fruit and vegetables streamed through the city gates on holy days. The Levites and singers had been forced to abandon their temple posts to raise food for themselves. Tithing had ceased. The priests were still taking foreign wives and the Hebrew language, the language of the laws of Moses, was scarcely understood by the children of these mixed marriages.

After a swift survey Nehemiah flew into action. Tobiah's furniture he ordered thrown out into the street and the temple cleansed. The new city gates he ordered closed in the afternoon before the Sabbath, under guard of Levites sanctified for the duty. (An ordinary servant would himself have been breaking the Sabbath in performing this task.) Businessmen were drafted to provide food for the temple staff. Trusted treasurers were set over all the stores.

However it was the mixed marriages that brought adulteration to the worship of Israel's God. It also disintegrated the deep understanding bought so dearly by the captivity that tested Nehemiah to the breaking point. He tells us that he argued with the culprits, cursed them, beat some of them and pulled out their hair, demanding that they swear not to allow their sons and daughters to marry foreigners. Yet, actually his hands were tied. He was a military governor under the Persian king, with no authority in religious affairs. The evil would continue until one arrived in Jerusalem who could handle the matter with the iron of religious law.

EZRA

The unknown writer of Second Isaiah expressed the promise,

And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer;
and while they are yet speaking, I will hear. (Isaiah 65:24)

Help came in the person of Ezra, the last great figure of the Old Testament. He was the priest whose granite character and uncompromising idealism turned the tide of religion in Jerusalem. Proudly tracing his ancestry back to Aaron, brother of Moses, Ezra was a dedicated student among the Babylonian priests. His deep concern with the law of Moses had "prepared his heart" to teach the law of the Lord in Israel.

Artaxerxes, eager for stability in Palestine, invested Ezra with royal authority to teach the law "after the wisdom of thy God." He was to teach all Jews "beyond the river," from the Euphrates through Palestine down to Egypt. He issued a decree that those wishing to return from Babylon might freely do so. The neighboring governors must provide a certain amount of wheat, oil and wine for the house of the God of heaven. The temple personnel should be exempt from taxation. He himself gave large stores of silver and gold, encouraging those Jews who were content in Babylon to do the same. As no Levites offered themselves, Ezra conscripted certain families. Their assistance would be needed in the temple.

There was no haphazard exodus. As carefully as the treasures were tabulated so every family and its ancestry was listed. This information was tremendously important in Ezra's eyes.

Carrying riches on the robber-plagued desert highways was a highly dangerous undertaking. So the caravan rested in its tent-village for three days of prayer and fasting before heading out into the wastelands. Ezra confesses in his memoirs:

I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him:... (Ezra 8:22)

Their prayers were heard. They arrived safely in Jerusalem only four months later. When the treasures had been recounted and safely stored within the temple Ezra turned to his main task. He needed to bring to the returned exiles a law which would clearly separate them from idolatry forever.

In the large square he and Nehemiah gathered the people. Standing on a wooden platform built for the occasion he opened the book of the Law of Moses (basically the first four books of our Old Testament) and began to read. Priests explained and translated into Aramaic for those who could no longer follow the Hebrew tongue. The confused people drank it in gladly. With joyful enthusiasm they revived the ancient Feast of Tabernacles, building leafy booths in the streets, on the flat rooftops or outside the gates. Throughout the days of feasting the study of the law continued.

Thus Ezra gave into the hands of the people themselves the Law of Moses. Israel, who had forfeited her land and her government, he welded into a religious unit under the law. Henceforth the status of "Jew" would not depend on land or temple or even on race, but on acceptance of and obedience to the law. This was the solid religious unity that would survive the turmoil of clashing cultures throughout the centuries to come.

How could this unity be safeguarded if, through mixed marriages, only a fraction of each family subscribed to it? As distressed as Nehemiah was, Ezra moved with deeper authority and wisdom. He tells us that he tore his garment and his mantle, plucked out the hairs of his head and of his beard, and sat appalled until the evening sacrifices. Then, in

his rags, he fell on his knees before the people. Praying as though their sins were his own, he begged God's forgiveness for this resumption of the very faults that had brought Israel's terrible ordeal of captivity.

So inspired was his eloquence that the people saw the need for purging their pagan relationships. Soon a proclamation summoned all the children of the exile to gather in Jerusalem. Standing in the street before the temple they received the woe-filled verdict of separation. Throughout the winter a committee examined each household and in the spring every pagan wife was sent away, taking her children with her.

Actually this expedient, often so harshly criticized, was an echo of the international thinking of the times. Compared with the rising nationalism of Athens, where foreign wives and children were sold into slavery, Ezra's decree was kind. But this was small consolation to grieving Judah. Nevertheless, through this ruthless cauterization Israel gained in Ezra's time a new identity under the Law.