

CHAPTER XII

PEOPLE OF THE LAW

Necessary as his drastic measures were, Ezra presented to the Jews a delicate problem of balance with which they were unprepared to cope. How could they remain aloof, uncontaminated, without nurturing contempt toward their neighbors? How could they bring the promised blessing to all nations if they harbored a bigoted hatred of them?

That some at least tended to err on the narrow side is evidenced by the last of the historical books of First and Second Chronicles and Ezra. In these books the unknown author (who some believe to be Ezra himself) sketches with strong, sweeping strokes the history of Israel from Adam to David and his descendants. It was not so much in terms of happenings as of people. On a huge canvas the opening chapters of scarcely interrupted "begats" paint the restless, growing world with the Hebrews always in the center. From Adam through Noah, Abraham and Judah the line runs straight to David. This was not according to man's will or law but according to righteousness, spiritual worth. Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, forfeited his birthright by immorality. Ephraim, whom the aging Jacob especially consecrated, lost his by rebellion. The Northern kingdom is practically disregarded by the Chronicler as having "rebelled against the house of David unto this day."

For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came
the chief ruler; but was the birthright was Joseph's: ...
(I Chronicles 5:2)

David the ruler established the temple. He set in order the priests, the Levites and singers, and the modes of true worship that would serve Judaism even after the temple was gone. Righteousness, according to the Chronicler, was the only criterion of success. Disregard of right activity must bring misery and misfortune.

The author lifted whole passages from his sources, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, and a dozen other works now lost. (This was at that time the mark of a competent writer, not plagiarism, as we would call it today.) At times he exaggerated tenfold the number of victims slain, of captives taken or animals sacrificed. This was done not to mislead but to highlight his central theme, the glory and sanctity of God, of the house of Judah, of the temple and of the priests and Levites.

Incidentally, the Chronicler introduced a new figure into Judaism.

For well over a hundred years, the Jews had lived under the benign rule of Persian kings. They were disciples of the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra). These kings regarded all local gods, Israel's Yahweh as well as Marduk and the multiple other deities, as representatives of the all-encompassing god Ahura-Mazda. Beneath this universal god

two powers, Light and Goodness and Darkness and Evil, were pictured as being forever at war. Satan became identified as the emissary of evil. We see the influence of this belief in a report concerning David. In II Samuel we read:

the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah. (II Samuel 24:1)

But the Chronicler writes:

And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel. (I Chronicles 21:1)

Satan, the Devil, totally unknown to Moses, slips into Judaism and will slink into Christianity as the relentless opponent of the omnipotent only God.

The emphasis by the Chronicler on ancestry gave those Jews who qualified as the "restored remnant" a sense of confidence and solidarity. Thereby Judah attained a religious identity that would survive. But she shut herself out from the world.

The world however could not be excluded. Growing facilities and occasions for trade and gradual mastering of the sea generated wider commercial ventures and closer relations with neighboring peoples. This brought with it echoes of thought broadened by the rise of logic and reason. In Athens, Socrates and Plato were challenging dogmatism and blind traditionalism. Their philosophy was carried swiftly along the routes of trade. Thoughtful, articulate Jews were moved to raise their voices in opposition to Judah's isolationism.

RUTH

The tender little book of Ruth was probably written soon after Ezra's time. It is a literary gem replete with symbolism for those who care to search the story had been kept alive since the early days of Samuel.

Forsaking his home in Bethlehem in time of famine, Elimelech of Judah sought refuge with his wife Naomi and his two sons in the well watered steppes of Moab. The sons took Moabite wives. Then Elimelech and both sons died, leaving the three widows destitute.

For Naomi the lonely return to Bethlehem seemed the only course. She urged the younger women to go back to their parents' homes and try to start life anew. One daughter-in-law reluctantly obeyed. The other, Ruth, refused to abandon her aging mother-in-law saying,

Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1:16, 17)

So they came to Bethlehem, the elderly widow and the young Ruth. They were foreigners in an unfamiliar town. Ruth set out to find food for Naomi and herself. It was harvest time and she turned in at a certain field to ask permission to glean behind the reapers. They knew of her, for at the well and in the marketplace word had passed swiftly of Naomi's loyal daughter-in-law. Her request was granted.

The field belonged to a man named Boaz, a kinsman of Elimelech. Ruth was pointed out to him. He gave orders that she should be favorably treated and should join the reapers at mealtime. Moreover, he instructed her to glean only in his fields, in case she met with unkindness elsewhere. So throughout the clear days of barley and wheat harvest Ruth and Naomi never lacked for food. However Naomi, as childless as though she had never born a son, never ceased to mourn. Ruth selflessly assumed the empty role of childlessness in order to care for her mother-in-law.

In those days it was customary, if a man died without offspring, that his nearest kinsman might take the widow as his own wife. The first child born to this union was legally the child of the deceased. One evening Naomi sent Ruth to the threshing floor where Boaz had been overseeing the work, to remind him of this custom. Touched that she had come to him rather than to a younger relative, and in strict rightness of conduct, he promised to attend to the legal details.

The following morning Boaz waited on the bench in the plaza just inside the city gate. A kinsman to Elimelech came by. He hailed this man, requesting him to sit beside him "in the gate." Then he stopped ten men of the elders of the city saying, "Sit ye down here" and they sat beside him. With the ten gathered as witnesses Boaz and the other kinsman discussed the purchasing of Naomi's property and the raising of a child in her son's name. Since the other man pleaded that his own inheritance would be jeopardized, it was decided and legally witnessed by the ten that Boaz should marry Ruth.

The first son born to Ruth and Boaz was placed in the arms of Naomi as her offspring. He was named Obed. He was destined to become the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David.

This little story may have suggested a key of admission for some of the foreign wives in Judah: "thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Genuine acceptance of the laws of Judah would have brought even a Moabitess into the fold. But the book of Ruth abruptly challenges Ezra's isolationism with the fact that King David himself was descended from a notably good woman of a foreign nation.

JONAH

The story of Jonah may be interpreted in various ways according to the views of the reader. To many Bible students it is a harsh exposure of the inertia and hypocrisy to which Ezra's apartheid had brought the Jews. Perhaps it is the first tract on the brotherhood of nations.

Instead of direct attack the unknown author chose to present his message as a whimsical tale or vision, perhaps even as history. He chose as his hero a man who had been famous for his wisdom in the past. In this hero he seems to have sketched the Jewish nation.

Jonah the prophet lived in the kingdom of Israel in the days of Jeroboam II. This was about a hundred and seventy years before Judah's exile. He foretold for the Northern king great success in his campaign against Assyria.

Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai,
saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it;
for their wickedness has come up before me. (Jonah 1:1, 2)

Nineveh was the capital of the ruthless Assyrians, the most feared and hated city on earth! Even in Ezra's time it remained a symbol of profligate wickedness and cruelty. What Israelite would wish for Nineveh, present or past, the rewards of repentance? As the Jewish nation had so often done, Jonah refused the call and took refuge on a ship bound for a distant port.

The Lord was not to be circumvented. The ship was buffeted and tossed by raging winds and crashing waves. These were the accepted sign of the anger of a god. Calling each on his own god for mercy, the pagan seamen did what they could to lighten the ship. Then they drew lots to discover who had brought such wrath upon them. The lot fell to Jonah. Where was the Hebrew? They found him down in the hold, fast asleep.

Jonah was confronted with the accusation. He confessed his waywardness and bravely accepted the customary, superstitious fate of being cast into the sea to save the ship. Yet these heathen men, friendly and merciful even in their terror, plied their oars with all their might to save this stranger who would not obey his God. However their efforts were in vain and, for fear that they would all die, they regretfully threw him into the sea.

Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.
(Jonah 1:17)

George M Lamsa, a noted Bible student whose remote native village kept Assyrian customs virtually unchanged until the twentieth century, explains that a dream of a "big fish" has the Aramaic meaning of trouble or indecision. Jonah survived -- we

know not how -- but he was precipitated into a gulf of confusion which forced him to rethink his stubborn attitude. Three days and three nights he struggled with his doubts and fears. He sums up the experience:

The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land. (Jonah 2:5, 7, 8, 10)

Again the call came, "Go to Nineveh!" Jonah proceeded to the hated city. At the risk of his life he cried out to his pagan enemies,

Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. (Jonah 3:4)

Had Jeroboam's successes undermined Nineveh's faith in her own gods? The king of Nineveh decreed that all his subjects must immediately heed the warning of the God of Israel and turn from their evil ways. He himself put aside his royal robes. Dressing himself in sackcloth he sat humbly in ashes. Even the animals, he commanded, must fast and be draped with sackcloth.

However, Jonah, servant of the God of mercy, heir to the promise that in Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed, would rather die than see Nineveh obtain mercy. He had no deep-rooted desire that these people should honor his God. He was angry and fearful for the safety of Israel if Nineveh were spared. He waited on a hillside overlooking the beautiful city that sprawled along the river bank, and hoped still for the doom that had been averted.

A sturdy green seedling broke through the parched earth beside him. He watched it grow swiftly until it provided welcome shade from the blazing sun. Then a worm punctured the gourd and it withered, and Jonah's resentment against the ways of God grew bitterer.

And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:9, 10)

This tension between the need for isolation and the duty of brotherly love was to be an everlasting challenge to Judaism.

JOB

In those last days of peace under Persian rule the art of measuring tradition with the yardstick of logic became more familiar to thinkers of all nations. The literature of Israel broadened into questioning.

If God is just, merciful and all-powerful, why does the righteous man suffer?

An unknown author of delicate but powerful literary skill explores the problem in a revival of the centuries-old folktale of Job.

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also with them. (Job 1:1, 6)

Here Satan is not that newcomer, the devil. He is the far more ancient "adversary" figure, a servant of God, and the "prosecutor" whose duty it is to test mankind. Satan sneered to the Lord that Job's righteousness was merely that of a comfortable and contented man. Let him lose his sense of well-being and the veneer of piety would soon fall away. Confident that Satan was mistaken; the Lord gave him permission to test his servant.

So it happened that Job, the highly respected and wealthy father of seven sons and three beautiful daughters was thrown, step by step, into childless grief and poverty. Then he was covered with tormenting, loathsome boils. Even his wife advised him, "Curse God, and die." Yet Job, sitting in pain among the ashes, cursed the day he was born but breathed not a word against his God. He longed only for an understanding of why suffering should thus be heaped upon him: "For I know that my redeemer liveth,..."

Three friends came to his home. Seven days and seven nights they sat on the ground beside him in appalled silence. Then, rather timidly, they suggested that all men are occasionally drawn into sin. If Job would confess and accept the correction by God all would be well. Job insisted on his complete innocence. The argument escalated by degrees into outright accusations of lying and outrageous pride. These were met with Job's fiery denial of wrongdoing. If only he might meet God face to face and question him!

Oh that I knew where I might find him! That I might come even to his seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. (Job 23:3, 4)

The discussion raged back and forth long and eloquently. It is couched in poetry and endlessly repetitive, but interspersed with hymns of great beauty and with proverbial wisdom.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
 Who is this that darkeneth counsel with words without knowledge?
 Gird now up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee,
 and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations
 of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Whereupon are
 the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the cornerstone
 thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of
 God shouted for joy? Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the
 peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich? Hast thou given
 the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?
 Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward
 the south? (Job 38:14, 6, 7; 39:13, 19, 26)

Then Job answered the Lord and said, I know that thou canst do
 everything, and that no thought can be withholden from thee....
 I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye
 seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and
 ashes. (Job 42:1,2,5,6)

God had answered Job. Though he had given no intellectually satisfying explanation, Job at last saw the Creator forever watching over and tenderly guiding his creation. Those "comforters" who, disregarding the problem had merely parroted traditional beliefs, incurred God's severe displeasure. To Job, for his sincerity, unbending faith and ultimate humility, was given the customary reward of patriarchal times: honor, gold, thousands of sheep and cattle, seven sons and three beautiful daughters and a life so long he enjoyed his grandchildren of the fourth generation.

ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes is often attributed to Solomon. But is written in post-exilic language. A gentle, scholarly teacher deals again with the questions of reward and punishment. According to his own observation and with echoes of the ancient philosophies of the Near East, with a deep sense of weariness he examines the struggles of material life:

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is
 vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh
 under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another
 generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The thing that
 hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that
 which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. I

made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits:... Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:2-4, 9; 2:4, 5, 11)

Into this bleak picture of emptiness he brings, like flashes of warm light, recognition of God's presence and order:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;...I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him. Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions. (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2, 14; 7:29)

The Teacher's advice for man, caught in this mysterious maze of life, is the voice of the very ancient epics of Babylon:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white, and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might;... (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

The last chapter is that famous and beautifully eloquent description of old age:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;...(Ecclesiastes 12:1)

The book is summed up, perhaps by an editor:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall ring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14)

PROVERBS

In the experience of mankind certain rules for successful living have been proven practical for all ages and all types of communities. As the quiet days of Persian rule rolled on, the priests and scribes gathered these maxims from many countries. They were probably memorized by the young men in the numerous flourishing schools. This gradually shaped our book of Proverbs.

The universality of these rules is reflected in their repetition, in only slightly varying forms, in the different segments of the collection. The key to the compilation lies in the introductory chapters:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil.
(Proverbs 1:7; 3:5-7)

Many of these proverbs were written, or collected, by King Solomon and these are introduced by couplets in praise of wisdom:

Doth not wisdom cry? And understanding put forth her voice? Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of man. For whosoever findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favor of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death. (Proverbs 8:1, 4, 35, 36)

The young students must repeatedly be warned against laziness:

Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard: when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep. So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man. (Proverbs 6:6-11)

And against the misuse of wine, the universal curse:

Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. At the last it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder. (Proverbs 23:29, 30, 32)

Next in value to wisdom is self-control:

A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger. Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls. Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? There is more hope of a fool than of him.
(Proverbs 15:1; 16:18; 25:28; 29:20)

Some of the oldest admonitions can be traced to the Egyptian sage Ptah-hotep (2400 B.C.E.) to those being trained in the Pharaoh's court:

When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee: And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite. Be not desirous of his dainties: for they are deceitful meat. (Proverbs 23:1-3)

Of course, there is much to be said concerning domestic affairs:

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it. Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith. A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike.
(Proverbs 22:6; 19:18; 15:17; 27:15)

The book closes with a twenty-two verse acrostic poem concerning the perfect wife. It gives a vivid picture of the many responsibilities of the upper class housewife of the times: weaving, spinning, sewing, shopping, the giving of charity, and the directing of her servants, even the purchasing of real estate.

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. Her children arise up, and call her blessed: and her husband also, and he praiseth her. (Proverbs 31:28)

PSALMS

During this time the "hymnal" of the temple and of the religious services in the synagogues was settling more or less into its present order. Selections for the book of Psalms occurred almost unnoticed.

There were songs of Israel's history, reminders of the years of struggle through the wilderness under the watchful care of her ever present God. There was the joyous processions and antiphonal choruses of the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem. It mentions the grief of backsliding and the glad song of triumph after the Assyrians' withdrawal from Jerusalem in Hezekiah's reign. One hears the wail of the captives in Babylon and shouts of thanksgiving at their return. Grievous questions were added after the destruction and oppression by the Greek Antiochus Epiphanes.

There were songs of devotion and happiness of Canaanite converts. Deep protestations of faith arose with earnest petitions for mercy and guidance. Cries of hatred towards Israel's enemies and songs of adulation and awe in the presence of the Lord exist throughout.

Some of the Canaanites' hymns to the storm god were adapted by the Israelites to express the majesty of their Lord. Bits of an Egyptian ode to the sun, composed perhaps by the young Amenhotep before the days of Moses, were appropriated to sing of the all pervading power of Israel's God.

On the wings of sincerity and inspiration, of the common experience and aspiration of mankind and of outreach to a sustaining power beyond man's fettered thought, the book of Psalms has brought strength and comfort to troubled hearts down through the centuries to modern times.

THE COMING OF THE GREEKS

During the years of Persian rule priests and scribes gathered the literary tools of Jewish strength and unity. At the same time the sophisticated culture of Greece was seeping slowly into the life of the commercial Near East. In the year 333 B.C.E. this trickle became a torrent. The brilliant young king of Macedonia, Alexander the Great, defeated a large Persian force at the battle of Issus. He swept with his army down through Palestine to Egypt where he founded Alexandria. Then he moved swiftly back to Persia and to the Indus River. As his empire grew the dream of his heart took shape: to impose Greek culture on the entire world.

He wasted no time on the crowded, ancient cities where the very stones spoke of deep-rooted tradition. From the Nile to the Indus he caused spacious new towns to spring up in his wake. They were populated with Greeks and Greek sympathizers. Prominent in every cluster of the new buildings was the gymnasium, an arena for racing, wrestling and discus throwing. There the community's young men met in joyous physical contests.

Though the little province of Judah was not on the main line of the march it did not go untouched by the brisk flood of the new culture.

Not physical cruelty but temptation was now the foe of Judah. The elders watched in anguish as many of their young men, even the priests, were drawn to the games. Not only did the contestants wear no hampering garments, and nakedness was a centuries-old symbol of shame and defeat, but far more dangerous to Judaism the athletes hailed the Greek god Hermes as their patron. Judah, with no land, no government and only a knowledge of God, fought for her life.

The Jews were actually treated with leniency by Alexander. After his untimely death, when the loosely knit empire was divided among four of his generals, Ptolemy of Egypt, who ruled over Palestine, continued to favor Judah. (It was in Alexandria, probably under Ptolemy II, that the Hebrew Scriptures were first translated into Greek in what we call the Septuagint or LXX version.)

The benign rule lasted for more than a hundred years. In the governing body of priests and laymen rumblings of division grew louder. Points of view crystallized. On the one hand were the aristocrats, priests and wealthy merchants. They saw the advantages, particularly to themselves, of the expanding Greek way of life. In their religious views only the words of Moses were binding. In their personal interpretation was permissible. Moreover God remained anthropomorphic. This was not entirely unlike the chief of the Greek gods, Zeus. This required only strict obedience to the letter and to ritual. Here were the roots of the Sadducees of the New Testament.

Opposing them, insisting on the spiritual value of the law, were the Hasidim, the pious ones. Highly educated, reverent students of the prophets they held that the Pentateuch (the Torah) must be adaptable to every age and situation. With the collaboration of the scribes, who were copyists and experts in the law, they evolved masses of interpretive literature and unwritten laws (the Talmud) for the guidance of the common people. Judaism to them was a spiritual way of life. It was completely incompatible with Greek thought.

Increasing the uncertainty of those years was the fact that when Alexander's empire was divided Palestine had again become the pawn of rival powers on the narrow corridor of the Fertile Crescent. The international chessboard was far larger than ever before. Syria, which fell to the rule of Alexander's general Seleucus, soon coveted the busy ports of Tyre and Sidon, even Alexandria itself. About the year 200 B.C.E. Syria succeeded in wresting Palestine from Egypt. The Syrian Antiochus IV had tremendous enthusiasm for Greek culture. Coupling this with fear of the outreaching arm of Roman power catapulted Judah into such wretchedness as she had never known before.

Solidarity in the Near East was a military imperative for Antiochus. The incomprehensible stubbornness of the Jews stood squarely in his way. In faction-torn Jerusalem lay fertile soil for intrigue and disloyalty. About 167 B.C.E. Antiochus was enabled to enter the Holy City. Ruthless and thoroughly he struck at the roots of Judaism.

Over the altar of the Lord God of Israel he planted the hated representation of Zeus, (probably his own likeness.) This was the abomination of desolation! Henceforth, no Jewish festivals were to be tolerated. There were no ancient temple rituals, no circumcision of infants, and no idleness on the Sabbath. The eating of swine flesh and the offering of it on the altars of the Lord became mandatory. To ensure obedience the walls of Jerusalem were torn down. A garrison dispensed the cruelest punishment or death to any Jew who dared resist.

In a little town west of Jerusalem an elderly priest named Mattathias refused a royal officer's command to desecrate the altar of his Lord with the unclean offering. When another priest stepped forward to conduct the ritual Mattathias struck down both the priest and the officer. Then, with his five sons, he fled to the hills. From their shelter he and a swiftly gathering army waged guerrilla warfare against the mighty forces of Syria. The implacable War of the Maccabees, which would at last bring Jewish independence, had begun.

DANIEL APPEARS ONCE MORE

Now, as perhaps never before, the Jews needed someone to lean on. There were no prophets, for the Law had superseded such leaders. Inspiration came through the ever-increasing use of books.

In the terrible days of Nebuchadnezzar had not Daniel successfully resisted, with the help of his God, all efforts to force him to eat the unclean things? Had not his three friends refused to bow down to the king's image? The centuries-old proofs of the Lord's care for his loyal followers were written for the strengthening of the tormented Jews. The message was clear: dare to be a Daniel.

The book of Daniel embodied two forms of encouragement: the youthful, fearless hero Daniel of unbending faithfulness to the Lord God of Israel, and the prophet Daniel to who was revealed the unstoppable unfolding of divine will. As though through the eyes of this prophet the author traced for his people, in cryptic visions and in varying animal pictures, the history of the rise and fall of world empires since the days of Nebuchadnezzar. He maintained that all were firmly under the jurisdiction of the Lord God, the Ancient of days, and Judah's dominion was on the way.

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13, 14)

The memory of that other Hebrew who had long ago stood firm in the face of oppression brought courage to the patriots during the War of the Maccabees. Many of the messages still carry comfort to those in need:

O man greatly beloved, fear not: peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong. And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened, and said, Let my Lord speak; for thou hast strengthened me. (Daniel 10:19)

MACCABEES

The book of Daniel was one of the last of the sacred writings to be incorporated in the Old Testament. (The book of Esther, also an appeal for loyalty and courage, was the last, its worthiness bitterly disputed.) From I Maccabees, not included in the Old Testament, and from other outside sources, we can sketch the heroic events that followed the flight of Mattathias and his sons.

Though the elderly priest died within two years, his five sons fought on with devoted courage. They were aided by the Hassidim and others who gathered with them among the hills. This may have been the first war for religious freedom the world had ever known.

Mattathias' third son, Judas Maccabeus (the hammer) proved to be a brilliant military leader. Avoiding the dangers of open warfare he outmaneuvered the Syrian forces by unpredictable harassment. Helped by Syria's own difficulties he triumphantly claimed Jerusalem for his people in the year 164 B.C.E. The joyful cleansing of the temple and restoration of traditional worship in December of that year is still celebrated in Hanukah, the Jewish Festival of Lights.

Stormy years of loss and gain followed while Syria struggled with internal problems. At last Simon, the only survivor of the five brothers, won the long-dreamed-of independence of Judea. He was hailed as hereditary high priest and governor. The first coins of the Jewish realm were struck in his honor. With diplomacy and martial skill his son greatly enlarged Judea's territory and set up a splendid court. The Jews had crossed the threshold of religious freedom and had at least a semblance of political independence.

However the high aim of the Maccabees faltered. Cold politics took over. In a tumult of ambition, of fratricide, of cruel punishment of rebels, of open fighting between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and of steady Hellenization, the independent Jewish state limped along for another seventy years. Then in 63 B. C. the Roman general Pompey established the rule of Rome in Palestine. Judah was again a subjected nation.

In a land seething with political uncertainty and religious chaos the aristocratic Sadducees clung to the concept of unchanging temple cult. The Pharisees buried themselves in the interpretation of the law. The canonization of these books we call the

Torah, which to Christians became the Old Testament, was virtually complete. Nothing new would be added.

Yet the historical impact of Abraham's quest to know God as an all-powerful, friendly God, faithful, unchanging and dependable to those who put their faith in him, did not stop there. It continued to impart to mankind the understanding that God will provide for those who turn their lives to him. Furthermore the revelation to Moses of I AM THAT I AM ("He Causes to be what Comes into Existence" "I am Creative Existence") did not end his mission but rather it began the forceful, forward sweep of the enlightenment of the children of Israel. This understanding of God is a springboard for earnest investigation, a challenge to men, women and children to explore its affects on human life. In this challenge lies the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham,

...in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. (Gen 12:3)