

CHAPTER 3

THE RETURN FROM EXILE

The story of the Exodus from Egypt is filled with miracles and signs, from the bush that burnt but was not consumed, up to the waters of the Sea of Reeds that flowed back, drowning the pursuing Egyptians. Compared with it the story of the return from Babylonia seems devoid of any manifestation of Divine action. Yet, when we look at the story more closely, God's mighty hand is seen at every turn. The spiritual baby needs the visibly wonderful at every turn; the mature believer should be able to see the working of God by faith, where the normal person can discern only the working out of natural law.

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that Nebuchadnezzar failed to send new settlers to Judea. Doubtless he was not aware that he was blindly obeying the promptings of God's Spirit. But God prepared for the return in another way also.

Josephus contains the "edifying" story (*Ant.* XI. i.2) that Cyrus somehow or other read the Book of Isaiah with its prophecy of Cyrus' rebuilding of the Temple. "Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfil what was written". The Bible simply says, "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" (*Ezr.* 1:1). Obviously we have no right to dictate to the Holy Spirit what should be included in and what excluded from the salvation history of Israel. For all that it is hard to believe that if Josephus' account were true, it would not have been recorded in Ezra.

Archaeology suggests a simpler reason for Cyrus' action, but one that illustrates God's power to control the most complicated positions. Stress is laid in the Bible that on the three occasions Nebuchadnezzar forced Jerusalem's surrender he carried away some of the Temple vessels, cf. *Dan.* 1:1 f. for the first time, *2 Chr.* 36:10 and *Jer.* 27:16 for the second and *2 Chr.* 36:18 for the third. It seems clear enough that here was no question of mere looting, but that the vessels were intended to act as a substitute for the non-existent image of the imageless Jehovah. The insistence on the vessels in *Jer.* 27:16; 28:3 is adequate proof of this.

Their presence in Esagila, Marduk's temple in Babylon, was obviously to magnify the chief god of Babylon, who in the eyes of Nebuchadnezzar had given him the victory over Jehovah. Inscriptions make it clear that the Assyrian kings likewise removed the images of gods from conquered cities. Nebuchadnezzar had treated other conquered areas in the same way. We know from the Cyrus Cylinder, on which he commemorates his capture of Babylon, that in Esagila there were images of gods from a wide area up to and including the

Assyrian cities Nebuchadnezzar had conquered, destroying their sanctuaries. It may be that a break in the inscription hides the apparent failure to mention the western areas including Jerusalem. To these gods Cyrus then adds those of Sumer and Akkad (southern Mesopotamia or Babylonia proper) "whom to the anger of the lord of the gods", i.e. Marduk, Nabonidus had brought to Babylon.

We are not told exactly when or on what pretext Nabonidus, the father of Belshazzar and last king of Babylonia, had brought these gods and goddesses as visitors to Esagila. It may be that he thereby hoped to strengthen Babylon. In fact he so infuriated the priests of Marduk by this, and also apparently by changes in the ritual of Marduk, that they betrayed Babylon into Cyrus' hands. Evidently part of their compact was that these gods should be sent home, not merely Marduk's "guests" but also those he had conquered. This Cyrus did at once, and where the sanctuaries had been destroyed, those that had been deported were allowed to go home to rebuild the temples. Among them were the Jews.

For many such a reconstruction based on archaeological finds is much less attractive than the thought that God worked a manifest miracle for the Jews. A little thought should, however, convince us that it really magnifies our view of God, for it shows Him controlling the whole flow of events over a longer period, even Nabonidus' arrangement of an ecumenical get-together of the gods. In addition, however, it shows that Israel is no longer to be seen as the centre and purpose of His working except by the eye of faith. It had now been caught up in wider world events, but, for those who could see, these were so moulded that God's purposes were being worked out in Israel, even when Israel did not know it.

It was also an indirect announcement that the history of Israel was no longer to be lived out in a separated, specially guarded area, as Palestine had in some measure been until then, but that it was being swallowed up in world history. Consistently with this the background of the Bible, which from the time of Abraham had been confined to the "Fertile Crescent", including Egypt, was suddenly widened and was never again contracted to anything like the old limits.

The Cyrus Edicts

So far as the Jews were concerned Cyrus issued two edicts. One is found in *Ezr.* 6: 3-5 in approximately its original Aramaic, the administrative language of the Persian Empire, at least from Babylonia westwards. It is clear that the text, as it has come down to us, is corrupt, for the temple's length is not mentioned; originally the dimensions will have been the same as those for Solomon's temple. Cyrus was willing to bear the chief cost of its rebuilding, but he was not giving the builders a blank cheque.

The other edict is now in Hebrew (*Ezr.* 1: 2-4) and is doubtless a translation from the original Aramaic. There are no grounds for sharing the scepticism shown by so many about its authenticity. The Zoroastrian who, so long as he was in Babylon, could with a clear conscience attribute his mastery of the city

to Marduk, could with an equally clear conscience attribute his lordship to Jehovah, the God of heaven, when dealing with Jews. The title "the God of heaven" is found already in Jonah 1 : 9, and it is in Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel used regularly as a title for Jehovah. Almost certainly it had been coined by Israel, when it had to explain to polytheistic foreigners the unique functions of Jehovah. The language of v. 3 cannot come from a monotheist or even from one seriously devoted to the worship of Jehovah—"His people", "His god", "He is the God who is in Jerusalem" (RV, mg., RSV).

The edict, by using the phrase "all His people", covered all descendants of the Northern tribes who might have wished to return to Jerusalem, and so to Palestine, but there is no evidence that any did, except the descendants of those who had already moved to the South in the time of the monarchy. It is clear that the edict did not demand obedience but simply gave permission to those who wished to return. In the same way there was no compulsion on their neighbours to help them. It seems to have been a basic principle with these Persian kings that the welfare of the state—and, on the whole, Persian rule must normally have meant a real increase in prosperity—demanded the correct honouring of the gods of the subject peoples. So a contribution to the Jerusalem temple would have seemed something quite normal.

The Sheshbazzar to whom Cyrus entrusted the task of bringing back the vessels and of at least starting the rebuilding of the Temple was given the title *tirshata*, usually rendered governor (Ezr. 2 : 63) but meaning "he who is to be feared"; the modern English would be His Excellency. This title of respect was given to a *pechah*, who might be either a governor or a man charged with a special mission of importance like Sheshbazzar.

We cannot identify him with certainty. His name is Babylonian, but the title "prince of Judah" (Ezr. 1 : 8) and his deciding the standing of priests of doubtful genealogy (Ezr. 2 : 63) show that he was a Jew and apparently heir presumptive to the Davidic throne. There is therefore a wide-spread belief that he was the Shenazzar of 1 Chr. 3 : 18, probably the oldest surviving son of Jeconiah or Jehoiachin. The once popular view that it is only another name for Zerubbabel finds few supporters today. If either had been a Hebrew name, the supposition would have been taken more seriously.

The Roll of Honour

That the Chronicler was using old documents is shown by the interesting variation in language between Ezr. 1 : 11 and 2 : 1, i.e. "brought up . . . came up." The former chapter is clearly an official account, and so the returning exiles are said to be brought up by Sheshbazzar, the representative of the king of kings. But Ezr. 2 is the roll of honour of the founders of the renewed Israel, and so, because they acted at the call of God and not at the dictate of a heathen king, they are said to come up.

This roll of honour is found also in Neh. 7 : 6-73a and, as might have been expected, in 1 Esdras 5 : 7-46. Both Nehemiah and 1 Esdras indubitably correctly head the list with twelve names; we should insert Nahamani between Reelaiah and Mordecai in Ezr. 2 : 2—it need hardly be said that neither

Nehemiah nor Mordecai are the well known men of these names. The singling out of twelve leaders shows the conscious claim that those who returned claimed to be the renewed Israel, irrespective of what tribe they might belong to.

The second name on the list, Jeshua, is obviously the High Priest (Ezr. 3 : 2), who is called Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah. Presumably this had become the popular pronunciation in the post-exilic community. The high priests were relatively soon to become the *de facto* leaders of the Jews, and under the Hasmonean priest-kings the *de jure* rulers. Here the name of Zerubbabel stands significantly in first place.

It is unquestioned that the grandson of Jehoiachin is meant. In Ezr. 3 : 2, Hag. 1 : 1, Matt. 1 : 12, Lk. 3 : 27 he is the son of Shealtiel. But in 1 Chr. 3 : 19 he is the son of Pedaiah. The most likely explanation is that he was the physical son of Pedaiah, but reckoned as Shealtiel's through a levirate marriage. It is also unquestioned that he was the heir presumptive to the Davidic throne once Sheshbazzar, if he was indeed Shenazzar, who must have been an elderly man by this time, was out of the way. His place at the head of the list shows that there was a very strong political element in the return. The order in Ezr. 8 : 2 shows that it was not self-evident that the royal prince should be put in first place.

After the leaders we find the men of the people of Israel, in this context those who were not of the tribe of Levi (Ezr. 2 : 2b-35). The list contains an interesting duality. First we have the sons of named individuals, i.e. those who could trace their genealogy back to well-known figures of the past. In some cases the numbers completely exclude the possibility that they are the names of those led into exile. These run from vv. 3-20. Then come the men of certain places (vv. 21-28); a reference to the parallel passage in Nehemiah will show that throughout this section it should be "the men of . . ." We then return to the sons of named individuals (vv. 29-32), followed by the men of certain places (vv. 33, 34) and finally there are "the sons of Senaah" (v. 35). Some conclusions can be drawn from this variation.

Those who could trace their genealogies back to definitely known individuals and so through them to the basic structure of the tribes were the descendants of those who had been able to maintain their property and so their position in society during the increasing poverty of the later monarchy, i.e. "the people of the land" mentioned in 2 Ki. 11 : 13, 20; 21 : 24; 23 : 30, 35. Where only the home town is mentioned, we can be fairly sure that their ancestors had become landless and had lost their family links; it was the memory of a common home that had preserved their links with Israel during the exile. This explains why far fewer of this class returned. There was no longer traditional land to claim back in Judea, so the attractions of what they had been able to gain in Babylonia were the greater. No place names further south than Bethlehem and Netophah are mentioned, thus confirming the implication of Jer. 13 : 19, that Nebuchadnezzar had cut off the Negeb, the south of Judah, as a punishment, when he deposed Jehoiachin. There can be no doubt that the Edomite encroachment on southern Judea had already been carried

through, though we do not find the name Idumea until later. This lasted until the time of John Hyrcanus (134–104 B.C.), who conquered Idumea and gave its inhabitants the choice of accepting Judaism or exile.

The peculiar structure of this list, with its alternation of groups, suggests strongly that we must presuppose at least two caravans with some space of time between them. With a total of about 50,000 this is highly probable. After all, the later return under Ezra numbered only some five thousand. Even under modern conditions the moving of 50,000 people over some 1,500 miles would be regarded as a major enterprise.

Then follow the Temple personnel. If we ignore the numerical variants in Nehemiah, we have for the people of Israel 24,144, but there are 4,289 priests, 341 Levites and 392 Temple slaves. If we include those of doubtful birth in *Ezr.* 2: 59–62, somewhat over 652 in number, we discover that out of a total of nearly 30,000 over 5,000 were connected with the Temple, i.e. one in six; of these roughly four-fifths were priests.

We can deduce that there would almost certainly have been no return had there not been so many priests who longed once more to fulfil the task in society to which they had been called by God. On the other hand the low proportion of Levites shows how they had gradually been squeezed out of their proper place in worship and teaching by the priests. Many must have felt that return would mean semi-starvation. This is confirmed by the difficulty Ezra had in persuading Levites to join him (*Ezr.* 8: 15). It is to be presumed that the Temple slaves and the descendants of Solomon's slaves returned because the exile had not meant the end of their servile status. Many of the exiles were theoretically Nebuchadnezzar's guests, and their slave property, so far as they could take it with them, remained their own. By origin these slaves were foreigners, but by this time they counted as Israelites, because they had adopted the religion of Israel, and in the course of the second temple's life they doubtless became regarded as Levites, for we have no evidence of their separate existence at a later date.

We have no further information about those who could not prove their descent (*Ezr.* 2: 59, 60). They may well have been proselytes, cf. *Isa.* 56: 6–8. Since their places of residence in exile cannot possibly have been the cause of their ignorance, we may rather imagine that special religious zeal ruling there caused them to face the long journey in spite of a possible rebuff at the end. Probably those who returned with Zerubbabel were far stricter than later generations, and we cannot doubt that their descendants were quickly absorbed into Israel. This is the more probable because a descendant of Hakkoz (*Ezr.* 2: 61) is found as a priest in *Ezr.* 8: 33, cf. *Neh.* 3: 4, 21, although no priest able to consult Urim and Thummim had arisen (*Ezr.* 2: 63). We know nothing of the fate of the sons of Barzillai.

It is fair to deduce then that those who returned were actuated by very differing motives and that socially they were very mixed. This helps to explain some of the strains and stresses we meet in the post-exilic prophets, as well as in Nehemiah.