

THE COMING OF THE GREEKS

Persia's defeats at Marathon (490), Salamis (480), and Plataia (479), though humiliating, could be explained away as the result of fighting at the end of over-extended lines of communication. Even the victors continued to look on the ruler of Persia as the Great King, and warring factions vied for his favour. It was not until about 400 that discerning men began to realize how essentially weak the vast empire was. Cyrus, a prince of the royal blood and satrap of Asia Minor, wanted to wrest the throne from his brother, Artaxerxes II. He strengthened the forces available to him by hiring ten thousand Greek mercenaries. In a battle near Babylon Cyrus fell, but the Greeks had shown such valour, that even after their commanders had been tricked and killed they were allowed to withdraw. After major hazards they reached the shores of the Black Sea, and finally six thousand of them were able to return to Greece.* Ambitious men realized that Persia would not be able to stand against any well-organized and disciplined assault.

Internal disunity among the Greeks gave Persia another lease of life, but finally Alexander the Great, the "he-goat from the west" (Dan. 8:5), launched his invasion in 334. By 331 the Persian empire had ceased to exist and before Alexander died in 323 he was the undisputed master of a larger empire than one man had ever ruled over before.

It is not likely that Alexander's meteoric career had immediate effect on the Jews. His victory at Issus (333) meant that only Tyre and Gaza along the Mediterranean littoral resisted him. While Tyre had been able to resist Nebuchadnezzar for thirteen years, it held out against Alexander for only seven months. We may take it for granted that all the smaller cities of the Western Fertile Crescent hastened to make their peace with the victor. If there is any truth at all in Josephus' fanciful story of Alexander's meeting with the high priest, Jaddua (*Ant.* XI. viii. 4, 5), it will be that the conqueror treated the Jewish leader, who had come to yield up the city, with the same courtesy that he used as a matter of policy to all the oriental leaders who did not oppose him.

After Alexander's death his empire fell to pieces, and soon there were four clearly recognizable portions (Dan. 8:8), soon to be reduced to three. Only two were of importance to the Jews. Ptolemy, Alexander's personal staff-officer, had realized the strategic position of Egypt. He became its satrap and in due course its king; he made Alexandria, which had been founded by Alexander the Great, his capital. While the other leading generals were tearing themselves to bits, he followed the age-old strategy of the Pharaohs and quietly

* Xenophon, one of their two leaders, has given us the story in the *Anabasis*.

annexed Palestine and Coele-Syria to act as a shield for his desert frontier; later he was able to add the Phoenician coast. Seleucus, after fluctuations of fortune, emerged as ruler of most of Alexander's Asiatic possessions, with his capitals at Seleucia on the Tigris and Antioch on the Orontes.

The Political Consequences for the Jews

Josephus quotes a Greek writer Agatharchides* (*Contra Ap.* 1, 22, *Ant.* XII.i.1), who mockingly told how Ptolemy had been able to capture Jerusalem by taking advantage of the Sabbath, when the Jews refused to take up arms. We need not doubt the truth of the story, but he was probably only making assurance doubly sure, for it is most doubtful whether the city would have resisted in any case. Both Josephus and the apocryphal *Letter of Aristeas* tell how Ptolemy deported a large number of Jews to Egypt, the majority of whom were apparently settled in Alexandria. They were not full citizens—for that they would have had to be founder members of the city—but they were given special privileges, which proved so attractive that they were soon joined voluntarily by others. This was the beginning of the Western diaspora or dispersion, which was to play such a tremendous part in Jewish history and also in the spread of the early Church.

Almost from the first there was cold war with frequent intervals of fighting between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. This meant that for more than a century, until Antiochus III conquered Palestine in 198, there was a frontier between Judea and the large community of the Eastern diaspora in Mesopotamia and Persia. We have no information as to whether this hindered pilgrimages to Jerusalem, when there was no actual fighting, but it must have decreased the influence of the Eastern diaspora at a time when far-reaching influences were beginning their work in Judea. At all times the eastern diaspora exercised a conservative influence, and this political separation must have greatly helped forward the new Greek influences.

Under the Persians Judea had been a backwater. Normally trade between the East and Egypt avoided the desert and went by ship from the Phoenician ports to the Nile delta. Both under the Ptolemies and later under the Seleucids Palestine became a frontier province with all that this implied, including the constant movement of troops, and for practical reasons most of the commerce between the rival states will have passed through it.

This foreign influence was greatly enhanced by the planting of Greek settlements in Palestine. Already Alexander had settled some of his veterans in Samaria after a revolt by the Samaritans. Later Greek cities included Raphia, Gaza, Ascalon, Azotus (Ashdod), the Decapolis, Ptolemais (Acre), and at a later date Caesarea, Caesarea Philippi and Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee. In such a connection "Greek" does not necessarily mean Greek by race, but that Greek speech, customs, religion and municipal order had been accepted. The influence on the Jews was profound and as early as about 300 the Greek writer Hecataeus of Abdera could say, "The Jews have greatly modified the traditions of their fathers".

* 2nd. cent. B.C., known only by quotations from his works.

Hellenistic Civilization

The Greeks were convinced that they alone were the only truly civilized people, even though a historian like Herodotus (484–424) looked with admiration on what Egypt and Babylon had been able to achieve. Hence Alexander considered that he came as a benefactor to the lands he conquered, and this outlook remained a fixed belief among his successors. There was in addition the realization that only by a common culture and religion could they hope to bind together such varied peoples and cultures.

No culture can be transplanted without being changed, and this was true also of that of Greece, when it was brought to the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia. The dialectal and cultural variations that had persisted in Greece itself were rapidly ironed out. Then when Egyptians, Syrians, Mesopotamians and Persians accepted what Greece had to offer them, something was bound to be lost. Scholars make the useful distinction by calling the original Greek product Hellenic, and the later and wider developments Hellenistic.

The centre of cultured Greek life had always been the city, the *polis*. The Hellenistic rulers never tried to impose a mass Greek civilization on their subjects; they could not have, even had they wanted to. They relied on their cities gradually to extend their civilizing influence over the countryside around. As the life of the *polis* had developed, it was essentially one for the cultured gentleman who had slaves to enable him to have sufficient leisure to give himself to polite pursuits. So we have to picture Hellenism as spreading from the city to the village, from the rich to the poor. The fact that most of the Jews in Judea were probably farmers with few slaves to give them leisure helps to explain why the majority were slow to be influenced by the new outlook on life.

There were two other factors that slowed up this influence. For Hellenism culture, language and religion were of importance, seldom physical descent, but as had been so strongly stressed in Ezra's time (Ezr. 9:2) the Jews were "the holy race". Then also Greek religion was, with minor exceptions, the worship of natural forces. Hence it was very easy to identify the Greek gods and goddesses with the equivalent nature deities, wherever Hellenism spread. If we compare the many-breasted image of Artemis (Diana) of the Ephesians, reproduced in so many Bible dictionaries and Biblical helps, with the beautiful huntress of Greek art, we shall gain some idea of what such syncretism, as it is called, meant. But an identifying of Jehovah with any of the gods of Olympus, though occasionally attempted in fringe sects, was inescapably apostasy. Monotheism, unless it remained a philosophical theory, was an abomination and folly to Hellenism.

Some indications of how limited the influence of Hellenism was outside the Greek cities are Syriac, i.e. Eastern Aramaic, translations of the Gospels, in spite of the influence of Antioch, Seleucia and other great cities, and Coptic ones in Egypt, in spite of the great Greek city of Alexandria, where the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament was made. We may also think of the continued use of Lycaonian among the citizens of Lystra (Acts 14:11)

and of their Punic dialect by the people of Malta (Acts 28 : 2), called for that reason "barbarians" by Luke.* Once we grasp this, we can more easily grasp the influence exerted by Hellenism. It can be compared with the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries, or with the upsurge of the natural sciences last century; at first these movements influenced an elite, but then penetrated ever more widely into the general consciousness.

The orthodoxy of the Naturei Karta in the Mea Shearim quarter of Jerusalem seems even to most Jews to be an almost incredible fossil from antediluvian times. Yet there was a time when the attitude to life it reveals was almost universal among men, who were under the rule of religious law and superstition, which embraced most of the conceivable acts of life. We seldom realize to what extent even the greatest kings were caught up in a round of priest-led ceremonial and tabu. It was Greek thought, spread by Hellenism, that to a very great extent made man an autonomous being, just as it was the rediscovery of ancient Greece at the Renaissance that gave birth to modern humanism.

It may be doubted whether the ordinary Greek really realized what he was doing. The Greek games had started as a religious ceremony, and to the last they were held in honour of certain deities, but they soon led to the regarding of human physical achievements and human beauty as something good in themselves. The Greek theatre, both on its comic and tragic sides, had been part of religious worship. When, however, Athenian drama was at its height, man could both complain of and criticize the gods or laugh at them, so long as it was done on the stage. Finally, the philosopher was allowed to question anything and everything, provided that, at least in the earlier stages, he made clear that he was speaking of what could be and not of what was. The effect of all this was to make first the typical urban Greek and then those who drank deeply of the cup of Hellenism essentially individualists. It is no chance that Paul's missionary work should have been based on cities, normally of importance, and that the response to his preaching was mainly one of individuals.

It was not only the hard life of the farmer, dependent on his own and his family's labour, rather than that of the slave, that erected a dyke that protected the Jews of Judea from the incoming tide of Hellenism. Even where they were most exposed to it in cities like Alexandria and Antioch on the Orontes, the fact that its main public expression in the theatre, the stadium and the philosophers' schools was still officially, even if nominally, linked with the old pagan religion, made it impossible for the Jew who cared at all for the traditions of his ancestors to take any part or even be a silent spectator.

Jesus Ben Sira

The author of the apocryphal book commonly called Ecclesiasticus will perhaps serve best to illustrate the earlier stages of Hellenism's influence on the Jews. Jesus ben Sira was born some time after 250 in Jerusalem, while it was still under Ptolemaic rule, and he probably lived to see the Seleucids take over the lordship of Palestine.

* Though "barbarian" sometimes had similar connotations to the Greek speaker as to the English, it really meant one who did not speak Greek.

He was a scribe. The force of such a term is often misunderstood. Bentzen wrote, "The wise denotes not only philosophers. It may justly be said that the word signifies the educated class. It is characteristic that its members were people who knew the art of writing. Often they are called the scribes, but then generally a narrower circle is meant . . . functionaries of state. The scribes then are mediators of an international culture in the same manner as modern academicians".* Similarly Rylaarsdam stated, "The role of the sages and the public estimate of them were very similar in all lands. They were the schoolmasters and court counselors".† That is why in Sir. 38:24, where RSV translates literally "scribe", NEB rightly prefers "scholar", cf. also p. 41.

Ben Sira's estimate of the scholar is fascinating. He has a word of appreciation for the farmer (38:25, 26), the craftsman, smith and potter (38:27-30), for he knows that they are essential; "Without them a city would have no inhabitants; no settlers or travellers would come to it . . . they maintain the fabric of this world, and their daily work is their prayer" (38:32, 34). But he grows lyrical, when he comes to the scholar. "How different it is with the man who devotes himself to studying the law of the Most High, who investigates all the wisdom of the past, and spends his time studying the prophecies! . . . The great avail themselves of his services, and he is seen in the presence of rulers. He travels in foreign countries and learns at first hand the good or evil of man's lot. . . . The memory of him will not die but will live on from generation to generation" (39:1, 4, 9).

Though he gives us few details, it is clear that at one time he travelled fairly extensively (34:11, 12; 51:13), and it may be that his bitter picture of the plight of the stranger (29:21-28) is based on his experiences at this time. What official tasks he may have been engaged in we are not told, but in 51:5, 6 he thanks God for his deliverance "from the foul tongue and its lies—a wicked slander spoken in the king's presence. I came near to death; I was on the brink of the grave." At the time when he wrote his book he had a school, which he did not hesitate to recommend in the closing section of his book (51:23-30). One of the marked features is his denunciation of women, which clearly mirrors his own unhappy experiences in his family life, both with his wife and daughters.

One has only to compare Ben Sira with Proverbs, or even Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), to realize the tremendous difference between them. In the two earlier books authorship is relatively unimportant; as in all the Biblical writings the authors' personalities have left their mark, but we do not attempt the fruitless task of trying to recreate the writer from the evidence of his work. Even in the Davidic psalms the personal experience behind them has been so generalized that in many cases it cannot be recovered. But though Ben Sira seems to have thought that he was writing Scripture, cf. 24:33; 33:16-18, yet apparently he was unaware that, unlike his predecessors, he was essentially preaching himself. In other words he was an individualist in a way recognized neither by the Old nor the New Testament. Though Paul has much to say about himself in his

* *Introduction to the Old Testament*, I, pp. 170f.

† *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature*, p. 9.

letters, it is in essence self-depreciatory. Ben Sira was not a proud man, but he was essentially self-complacent. This is a quality, it is worth adding, which we repeatedly find in later generations among the rabbis.

R. H. Pfeiffer put it very well, when he said, "Thus Sirach marks the transition from the Bible to the Talmud, from the authority of inspiration . . . to the authority of learning."^{*} It is very doubtful whether he ever realized it, for he was a declared foe of Hellenism, but he had learnt his outlook from the philosophers whom he had met.

Because the time came when his book was blacklisted (c. A.D. 200), there are modern scholars who think that he was a Sadducee. The arguments for this are very tenuous, and it is far more likely that he was rejected for the same reason that the Tannaim—the rabbis between approximately the beginning of the Christian era and A.D. 250—got rid of all the extra-canonical books at this time. In their enforcement of their own views no voices might be heard other than the Scriptures themselves and their official interpretations of them. As we shall see in the next chapter Ben Sira antedated both Sadducees and Pharisees. Had he lived to see them, he would almost certainly have favoured the latter, but he would have felt superior to both parties.

Ben Sira then is the explanation of one of the most striking features in Rabbinic Judaism. While Scripture, especially the Torah, is treated with the greatest respect as God's revelation, yet it is handed over completely to the interpretation of the scholar. The classical expression of this is, of course, the story of R. Eliezer and his opponents. "On a certain occasion R. Eliezer (c. A.D. 100) used all possible arguments to substantiate his opinion, but the Rabbis did not accept it. He said, 'If I am right, may this carob tree move a hundred yards from its place.' it did so . . . They said, 'From a tree no proof can be brought.' Then he said, 'May the canal prove it.' The water of the canal flowed backwards. They said, 'Water cannot prove anything.' Then he said, 'May the walls of this House of Study prove it.' Then the walls of the house bent inwards, as if they were about to fall. R. Joshua rebuked the walls, and said to them, 'If the learned dispute about the Halakah (the rules of behaviour), what has that to do with you?' So to honour R. Joshua, the walls did not fall down, but to honour R. Eliezer, they did not quite straighten again. Then R. Eliezer said, 'If I am right, let the heavens prove it.' Then a *bat qol* (a voice from heaven) said, 'What have you against R. Eliezer? The Halakah is always with him.' Then R. Joshua got up and said, 'It is not in heaven' (Deut. 30:12). What did he mean by this? R. Jeremiah said, 'The Law was given us from Sinai. We pay no attention to a heavenly voice. For already from Sinai the Law said, By a majority you are to decide (Exod. 23:2).'[†] This means quite simply that the rabbis believed that God had so delivered Himself into the hands of men by the revelation of the Torah, that it was for them to decide how He was to be served, provided that the decision was consistent with the Torah, or could be made to appear so.

We must go further. Sometimes—rarely maybe, but definitely for all that,

^{*} *History of New Testament Times*, p. 369.

[†] *Bab.M. 59b*, quoted in C. G. Montefiore & H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, pp. 340f.

as in the case of Hillel's famous *prosbul**—they were prepared to set aside the plain teaching of the Torah. They might shrink back from Ben Sira as too great an individualist, laying too much stress on his own authority, but they entirely approved of his implicit acceptance of the authority of human reason and study, and this had come straight from Hellenism at its best. We shall see how the intolerance of Hellenism at its worst was to make Judaism turn its back on it decisively, but this legacy from the defeated foe was to remain down to the present day.

* Deut. 15 : 2 ordered the remitting of loans in the Sabbatical year. As a result it became increasingly difficult to borrow as the Sabbatical year drew near. Hillel (1st cent. B.C.) introduced a scheme by which the creditor affirmed before a court of law that the collection of the debt was handed over to the court. Since public debts in contrast to private ones were not affected by the Sabbatical year, it was a guarantee of repayment and so made loans easier to obtain.