CHAPTER 10

JUDEA IN THE LATE PERSIAN PERIOD

We know virtually nothing of the approximately hundred years that elapsed in Judea between the work of Ezra and Nehemiah and the coming of the Greeks. Were it not for the long drawn-out struggle between the Greeks and Persians at this time and the fascinated curiosity of Greeks who visited the court of the Great King, we should know virtually nothing of Persia's wider history also. So our ignorance of what took place in Judea is not surprising.

Josephus tells us (*Ant.* XI. vii. 1) that in the time of Bagoas, a Persian governor after Nehemiah, known to us also from the papyri from Elephantine, the high-priest John killed his brother Jeshua in the temple-precincts. As a penalty Bagoas both entered the Temple and for seven years imposed a tax of fifty shekels for each lamb offered in the public sacrifices. If Josephus is correct in saying that Jeshua was a friend of Bagoas and was intriguing to obtain the high-priesthood, his brother's action becomes more understandable, though in default of further information we may not condone it. The strange thing is that Bagoas does not seem to have inflicted any real punishment on the culprit, for the tax hit the people as a whole. Oesterley is probably correct in suggesting that the very heavy fine—a minimum of two lambs was offered each day as a public offering (Num. 28 : 3)—was a punishment for rebellious dissatisfaction among the people.*

Some twenty years before Alexander the Great shattered the Persian empire a very serious revolt broke out in Phoenicia, which took three years to quell. There are a few indications that Judea was also affected, but the extremer deductions by some scholars of large-scale deportation to the south of the Caspian Sea had better be taken with a large pinch of salt. M. Noth and J. Bright in their histories of Israel show their wisdom by ignoring the whole question. Probably the main reason why these slight indications have been welcomed by some is that this alleged calamity allows them a place for psalms which extremer critics had earlier attributed to the Maccabean period, but which they do not want to move back to the time of the monarchy. Had the calamity justified the language of the psalms in question, it is incredible that it would have left as good as no trace on Jewish memory.

The Samaritan Schism

Even though we cannot fill in the details with certainty, one thing of the greatest historical importance happened in this period, viz. the religious break between the Samaritans and Jerusalem, which we call the Samaritan schism.

* Oesterley and Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. II, p. 140.

If the relationship between the Persian sub-provinces of Samaria and Judea had remained on the level of political hostility, based mainly on meaningless memories of the past that had irrevocably vanished, it is likely that it would gradually have become normal. When placed within the larger context of the satrapy Beyond-the-River, and especially in the framework of the Persian Empire, large even by modern standards, the old rivalry had as much real meaning as the annual international Rugby clashes on the sports field. Unfortunately a religious element was added to it, and the bitterness engendered has remained to the present day, though at last it seems to be vanishing among the five hundred or fewer survivors of the Samaritans.

The dominant view both in Jewish and Christian circles that passages like Deut. 12:5–7, 11–14; 16:2; 26:2 demand one exclusive central sanctuary is probably incorrect.* A comparison of Deut. 12:14 and 23:16 (Heb. 23:17) will show that the language used need not be given a purely exclusive interpretation. Josiah's action in leaving Jerusalem as the only operative shrine may just as well have been motivated by his feeling that only so could he finally stamp out idolatry and corrupt religion. It is far more likely that though there was a central sanctuary at which the Ark of the Covenant was lodged, there were a limited number of other lawful sanctuaries, which had been marked out by Divine appearances or theophanies. In addition there were the many illegitimate "high places". Though we know of no such theophany at Shiloh or Gibeon, we need not doubt that there had been one. It should be noted that while there was doubtless a sanctuary at Samaria itself, in the absence of any well-authenticated theophany it was never able to displace Bethel as the leading shrine of the Northern kingdom.

It was not the building, or even the ritual furniture, at a sanctuary that made the place holy, but the appearance of God or of the angel of the Lord (Jdg. 6:11, 2 Sam. 24:16–18) had left a virtually indelible quality of holiness there—natural phenomena would normally account for the choice of "high places". This holiness persisted whether or not men continued to worship there, so the Israelites after the conquest of Canaan could restart their worship in the places where the Patriarchs had left off centuries before. This holiness was not affected by the destruction of buildings and altar, cf. 1 Ki. 18:30. The story of Josiah at Bethel and the other sanctuaries of Samaria (2 Ki. 23:15–20) shows how a holy place could be profaned, i.e. made common ground once more.

Josiah acted similarly with the high places of Judah (2 Ki. 23:8, 10, 13), which in practice doubtless included the sanctuaries at Hebron and Beersheba, where there had in fact been theophanies. It may be that Shiloh's complete lapse into obscurity, once the Philistines had destroyed it, was due to their carrying out some similar ceremony to destroy the holiness of the site that was the visible centre of Israel's unity.

The heathen settlers in Samaria accepted the Mosaic law (2 Ki. 17:24–34), but quite naturally followed the religious customs of the remnants of the northern tribes—no later date for their acceptance of the Law really makes

* Cf. especially Brinker, *The Influence of Sanctuaries in Early Israel*, pp. 199f.

sense, least of all one after Ezra. This made their assimilation with the old population the more rapid, and their heathen cults, separated from the soil in which they had grown up, gradually withered away. Josiah's great reforming drive through Samaria, mentioned earlier, deprived this mixed people of any places of worship for which they could claim any degree of holiness.

We need not doubt that in the description of Josiah's passover (2 Chr. 35 : 1–19) the Israelites mentioned as being present were not exceptions, but that a good section of those who took part had come from Samaria. Similarly we find pilgrims from Shechem, Samaria and Shiloh coming to the ruins of the Jerusalem temple after it had been destroyed (Jer. 41 : 45)—there is nowhere any suggestion that the Babylonians had deliberately profaned it. Doubtless such pilgrimages continued throughout the period of the exile, for, as already said, the holiness of the site did not depend on the buildings.

In spite of sentimental exaggeration by some modern writers, there is no suggestion that the Samaritans were ever excluded from the Temple site. The refusal (Ezr. 4 : 3) was to let them join in the building operations, presumably because it would have given them certain prescriptive rights in it. There is no evidence that the exclusion from Israel of those of foreign origin (Neh. 13 : 3) included Samaritans, nor are they listed among the foreign wives (Neh. 13 : 23, Ezr. 9 : 1). In a population that had become predominantly Israelite, it would have become impossible to isolate the foreign elements, even though it was felt an insult for a priest to marry a woman of such questionable descent (Neh. 13 : 28).

We know from Josephus that they were not excluded from the Temple until the time of Christ, and then it was only because they had tried to desecrate it with corpses (*Ant.* XVIII. ii. 2). For the Talmudic rabbis they were *minim* (heretics or schismatics), who would have been welcomed at any time, if they had abjured their peculiar views. If things are different today, it is merely because of the outworking of rabbinic marriage laws, which makes it almost impossible for the Bne Yisrael from India, Falashas from Abyssinia, Karaites, and even more Samaritans to be welcomed into the orthodox Jewish fold, although their status as Jews is recognized.

It must have been most galling, therefore, for the Samaritans in the time of tension that reached its climax under Nehemiah to have to use the Jerusalem temple, or alternatively one to which the quality of holiness could not legitimately be ascribed.

The Temple on Mt. Gerizim

We are told by Nehemiah, that he drove out a grand-son of Eliashib, the high-priest, when he first came to Jerusalem (3 : 1), because he had married one of Sanballat's daughters (13 : 28). Josephus, on the other hand, tells us (*Ant.* XI. vii. 2; viii. 2) that Eliashib's great-grandson Manasseh, brother of Jaddua the high-priest, an older contemporary of Alexander the Great, was married to the daughter of a Sanballat, who had been made governor of Samaria by Darius III, the last king of Persia. The people insisted on his divorcing his Samaritan wife, so he went to Sanballat, who promised to build him a temple

on Mt. Gerizim. The promise was fulfilled by permission of Alexander the Great, whose side Sanballat and the Samaritans had taken (*Ant.* XI. viii. 4). According to Josephus, Manasseh was joined by a number of priests and Levites who were in similar matrimonial difficulties. Later others came as well, who had fallen foul of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Doubtless they were mainly those who did not approve of Ezra's interpretation of the Law, rather than, as Josephus half suggests, bad characters.

Because Josephus' account is tied up with the story of the respect and awe with which Alexander treated Jaddua, the high-priest, a story which today is almost universally regarded as an edifying piece of pro-Jewish invention, and also because he knew so little of the Persian period, and what he did was often inaccurate, until recently it has been generally assumed that he had erred here too. So it is claimed that Josephus is giving no more than a blown up version of Nehemiah's expulsion of Eliashib's unnamed grandson. We may, however, give him the benefit of the doubt.

Josephus had no motive for separating the schism from Nehemiah's time, the more so as he admired him. We know from other sources that there were two and possibly three Sanballats, presumably all of the same family, who were governors of Samaria. Many scholars have on general principles agreed that the building of the Gerizim temple would have been more likely under the Greeks than the Persians. Nor may we forget that Josephus, a priest himself, indubitably had access as a younger man to priestly records and traditions. Finally, the situation as depicted by him, where there was popular support for strictness in the application of the Law with a priestly and Levitical group, possibly appealing to older traditions, opposed to it, would suit a somewhat later period better than that of Nehemiah himself.

However that may be, a temple was duly built on Mt. Gerizim. The reason for the choice is not hard to find. It is the only site mentioned by name in the Torah for the worship of God after the conquest (Deut. 11:29; 27:4–8, 11–14). The Samaritan Pentateuch, followed by the Old Latin, reads Mt. Gerizim in 27:4 instead of Mt. Ebal, cf. NEB mg; Josh. 8:30 has Mt. Ebal. At this distance of time it is impossible to know with certainty whether the obviously deliberate alteration was made by Samaritan or Judean scribes.*

As recent discoveries at Wadi Daliyeh confirm,† Alexander had Samaria destroyed, many of its leading citizens put to death, and a new city built peopled mainly by his veteran soldiers. The Samaritans rebuilt Shechem, so bringing their chief town and sanctuary together.

Their priesthood was a Zadokite one, and they had brought with them the old priestly traditions from Jerusalem, traditions which were in some respects stricter than those enforced by Ezra and his successors. Real bitterness between the two sides probably showed itself first in the time of the Hasmonean priest-king John Hyrcanus (134–104 B.C.). He captured the whole of Samaria and

* According to Rabbinic tradition there are as many as eighteen passages, where they claim they had changed the text for to them adequate reasons.

† F. M. Cross, *Papyri of the Fourth Century B.C. from Daliyeh* in D. N. Freedman & J. C. Greenfield (editors), *New Directions in Biblical Archaeology*.

destroyed the temple on Mt. Gerizim (107 B.C.).* This was not simply an act of spite. Even as he had earlier forced the Idumeans to accept Judaism, so now he was forcing the Samaritans to conform to Jerusalem's version of Judaism. When the Samaritans were freed from Jewish rule by the coming of the Romans, there remained a legacy of bitterness that could not be bridged. So while in one sense the Samaritan schism began with the return of the Jews from exile, in another it was made unhealable by the action of John Hyrcanus.

For the Jews it was not the Temple as such that mattered. There is no evidence that they felt very strongly about the strange sanctuary at Elephantine, or the later copy of the Jerusalem temple at Leontopolis in Egypt. What mattered was the Samaritans' proud, defiant claim that this was the holy place chosen by God (Jn. 4:20), that they had an Aaronic priesthood superior to the Hasmoneans, who took over the office in Jerusalem in the middle of the second century, and that they interpreted the Law according to an older tradition—so they claimed—than that in force in Jerusalem. In many points it seems to have been stricter than that of the Pharisees, as was indeed also that of the Sadducees.

This meant spiritual warfare in which there could be no compromise. Later the Christian was to face the rabbinic Jew with a clear-cut either-or, but the Samaritans threatened to undermine the authority of the rabbinic leaders, while in large measure appearing to agree with them. The attitude of many a hyper-orthodox rabbi to the Liberal and Reform leaders today doubtless mirrors the way in which his ancestors looked on those of the Samaritans.

Religion in the Late Persian Period

Carlyle quotes an unnamed and unidentified philosopher as saying, "Happy the people whose annals are vacant", and this is in many ways the judgment to be passed on Judea in the Persian period. For perhaps the only time in their history the Jews were able to stand aside from world-history, their troubles belonging more to the parish pump than to the destiny of nations. Even the Fertile Crescent seemed largely to have sunk into slumber waiting for the coming of the West, led by the he-goat of Dan. 8:5, i.e. Alexander the Great. That is perhaps why Dan. 11:2 enumerates only four kings of Persia, where the modern historian knows of at least eleven.

In such a setting, once Zerubbabel had passed from the scene, and with him the hopes of the Davidic dynasty, the high-priest became inevitably the natural representative of the people, the more so as it was to religion that the Persians granted autonomy. So began that unique feature of Jewish history in which most of its real leaders were also leading figures in its religion. Political power often corrupted the religious leaders, but it meant that political power normally remained a means to an end, not an end in itself. In addition, while Jewry's leaders, when the people were prospering, were normally rich, sometimes very rich, riches were also regarded as a means to a better end.

In Babylonia and Persia concepts from Zoroastrianism gradually seeped into

* After Bar Cochba's revolt (A.D. 132–135), as an extra punishment on the Jews, the Romans allowed the Samaritans to rebuild the Gerizim temple. This was destroyed by the now dominant Christian Church in 484. The mountain top is still regarded as holy by the Samaritans, who have their Passover sacrifice there.

Jewish consciousness, but on their way to Judea they lost much of their force and never played much part in standard Judaism. We find them in the New Testament, but in such an attenuated form that they merely enrich the heights and depths of Christian theology.

As a result the hard-working farmers of Judea had little theology to distract them as they tried to assimilate the lessons of the exile and the implications of Ezra's presentation of the Law. The absurdities of pilpul* and casuistic hair-splitting in East European town ghettos and village *shtetls* or in the narrow alleys of Mea Shearim tend to hide from us that for much of its history rabbinic legalism was extraordinarily down to earth and in touch with reality. It is insufficiently realized that well before the heroic times of the Maccabean brothers the life of the average Jew was strictly governed by the Law of Moses. The detailed application of it to every feature of life still lay in the future, but the firm foundations had been laid. We may attribute the greatness of this victory largely to the relatively unbroken calm of the later Persian period.

* Pilpul is the type of hair-splitting, logic-chopping argument to which the mediaeval schoolmen were also addicted.