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BABYLON ON THE NILE

I

THE Roman author Strabo, describing a journey to Egypt about the year 20 B.C., says (*Geography* xvii. 1. 30):

“Having sailed farther up the river, one comes to Babylon, a stronghold, where some Babylonians had withdrawn in revolt, and then successfully sought permission from the kings to build a settlement; but now it is an encampment of one of the three legions that guard Egypt.”

Josephus (*Ant.* ii. 15. 1) says that Babylon was built by Cambyses when he conquered Egypt in 525 B.C.

Diodorus Siculus also refers to Babylon in his *History* (i. 56. 3), and attributes its foundation to a colony of Babylonian prisoners in the reign of Sesostris (probably Rameses II). He says that it occupied a strong position on the river, opposite to and slightly north of Memphis.

John of Nisibis (seventh century A.D.) says that it was built by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem, and connects it with the Jewish exile into Egypt in the days of Jeremiah. Still other explanations of the origin and name of the colony exist.

From these records it may be taken as certain that in the time of Christ a settlement called Babylon was in existence, and had already existed for several centuries, and that it was located where Old Cairo now stands, and that it was the station of a Roman legion.

About a century later Trajan repaired the Ptolemaic canal and prolonged it via Heliopolis to Babylon. He also built here a great fortress, the ruined wall of which can still be seen, going by the name of Kasr-el-Shamma. This lies a few hundred yards to the north of an earlier one, the site of which was in recent times still known as Deyr Bablun (E. L. Butcher, *The Story of the Church of Egypt*, p. 35).

The site and communications of this Babylon are still further confirmed by a survey which was made in A.D. 138, recorded in the itinerary of Antoninus Pius (*op. cit.*, p. 42),

in which six Egyptian roads are mentioned. Of these two passed through Babylon: one (that known to the prophets) which ran from Pelusium near the frontier of Palestine to Memphis, crossing the river at Babylon, and the other which came from Nubia and after leaving Babylon passed through the districts of the Jews to Klysmā.

II

There is also evidence, amounting to practical certainty, that a Jewish colony existed in Babylon from early times.

From the days when Jeroboam went down into Egypt (1 Kings xi. 40), a constant stream of coming and going connected Egypt with Palestine. The main route for this traffic ran, by the former of the two roads just mentioned, from Memphis through Babylon and Heliopolis along the Pelusiatic or eastern branch of the Nile delta to Pelusium, and thence near the sea coast to Gaza. Complete evidence for the use of this route exists in the writings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer. ii. 16; xliii. 5ff.; xlvi. 14; Ezek. xxx. 14-18). The places they mention all lie along this route. Starting from Palestine we come first to Sin (Pelusium), with Zoan (Tanis) somewhat to the S.W. Then follow in order Tahpanhes (Daphnae) some sixteen miles farther on (the site of which was fully excavated by Sir Flinders Petrie), Pi-beseth (Bubastis), midway between the last-named and On (Heliopolis), some six miles N. of Cairo. After that the route crossing the river comes to Noph (Memphis) on the left bank of the Nile, which would be the natural starting-place of the Nubian road leading through No (Thebes, Luxor) on to Pathros (the south land). Even Baedeker could not be a clearer guide, and the mention of these places by the prophets implies that they were familiar not only to them, but to the Jews of that day.

Jeremiah expressly tells of a considerable migration of Jews to Tahpanhes after the fall of Jerusalem, and of colonies at Migdol, Tahpanhes, Noph and to the South. In the year 1907 papyri were found at Elephantine, near Syene (Aswan), containing the records of a Jewish colony there from 494 to 400 B.C., describing their temple, priests and sacrifices, which may have been the colony referred to by Jeremiah as being in the "south land" (Jer. xlv. 1). In the second century B.C.

(c. 166) the Jewish high priest Onias fled into Egypt, and built a temple at Leontopolis, twenty miles N. of Cairo, which is mentioned by Josephus as standing in his time, and was also excavated by Petrie.

There is abundant evidence as to the great number of Jews settled in Egypt at the beginning of the Christian era. Josephus testifies (*Ant.* xiv. 7. 2; xix. 5. 2) to the size and influence of their colonies: in Alexandria one fifth and in Cyrene one quarter of the population was Jewish; they had their own rulers and enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges. Edersheim computes the total number of Jews in Egypt as about a million (cf. Philo, *In Flaccum*, 6, 8), or one eighth of the population. The Gospels and Acts bear testimony to the constant communication in both directions between Libya, Egypt and Palestine (Mark xv. 21; Acts ii. 10; vi. 9; viii. 27ff.; xiii. 1).

It would be surprising indeed if, in view of this, a Jewish colony had not existed in Babylon, a nodal point of these routes, on the river bank, and of commercial and political importance owing to the presence of the Roman garrison. That this was so is proved by the existence of a synagogue in Old Cairo whose story goes back through several rebuildings to the time of Christ, while tradition carries it back to the time of Jeremiah (Butcher, *op. cit.*, p. 15). El Makrizi, a historian of the ninth century, states that this synagogue was built forty-five years before the second destruction of Jerusalem, and that in it was a copy of the Pentateuch written by Ezra the priest. He states further that there existed an inscription saying that the building was erected "in the year 336 of the era of Alexander" (c. A.D. 24).

The synagogue became a Christian church in A.D. 451, and passed into the hands of the Melkites; in the ninth century it was repurchased by the Jews, and made into a synagogue again; they also acquired a tomb said to contain the bones of Jeremiah. About 1882 two European antiquarians saw the roll of the law referred to above, and that it was of great antiquity; but their attempt to get possession of it ended in failure, and it was removed to an unknown place.

After all deductions have been made, there appears to be a substantial body of testimony to the existence of a Jewish colony in Babylon, near the quarters of the Roman legion, at the time of the birth of Christ.

III

These facts, geographical and political, throw light upon the descent of the holy family into Egypt. In the first place, they show how natural, and how easy, that flight would have been. In addition to prophetic saying and ancient example, as Alford remarks, "Egypt, as near, as a Roman province and as independent of Herod, and as much inhabited by Jews, was an easy and convenient refuge".

It may be taken as certain that they would follow the Roman road, and that they would not pause till they were well past the frontier. If they passed through Leontopolis and Heliopolis they would come to Babylon. What more natural than that they should stay here? There would be no reason why they should either cross the river or proceed farther south into Upper Egypt. The presence of a Roman garrison would offer an additional safeguard. In any case ancient tradition asserts that they did stay here, and what is still more significant is the fact that no other place has ever made claim to this distinction. The absence of any such competitors goes far to prove that the Babylon tradition was established at a very early date.

At Heliopolis, at a spot called Matariyeh, there is still pointed out the tree of St. Mary, under whose branches the Virgin Mother is said to have rested with her Child, on the way to Babylon; and although the tree now shown is a sycamore and not more than two centuries old, the tradition may be primitive.

A considerable portion of Trajan's wall, mentioned above, is still standing. It is pierced at one place by an opening, cut through eight feet of solid masonry, which leads to the Church of Abu Sargeh, or St. Serge (A. J. Butler, *Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt* i, p. 156). "Below the choir is the crypt, a small low subterranean church, which is traditionally believed to have been built on the spot where the holy family rested during their flight into Egypt. The crypt probably dates back to the sixth century, the church itself being about a thousand years old" (M. Fowler, *Christian Egypt*, p. 194). Another church near, that of Mari Mena, dates from the fourth century.

When all the evidence is considered, especially the absence of any rival tradition, it may be regarded as probable that

Joseph and Mary travelled as far as Babylon on the banks of the Nile, and finding there a Jewish colony and perhaps friends, made this their temporary home.

IV

We now approach the interesting question whether it was from this Babylon in Egypt that Peter sent forth his first epistle.

There are two alternative suggestions—one, the well-known capital city, Babylon on the Euphrates; the other, Rome, the Babylon of the Apocalypse. The indecisive nature of the evidence is shewn by the division of opinion. Rome is favoured by Roman Catholic writers for obvious reasons. Among Protestants it is upheld by Ewald, Salmon, and Ramsay. Babylon on the Euphrates is defended by Erasmus, Calvin, Bengel, Lightfoot and Alford. But it is to be noted that all these writers rely, not so much on positive evidence, which they admit to be slender, as upon the difficulties in the way of the alternative solution.

Alford quotes Leclerc, Mill, Pearson, Calovius, Pott, Burton, and Gresswell, as favouring the Egyptian Babylon, but he dismisses it, chiefly because this Babylon was small and little known.

It is true that Eusebius says (*H.E.* ii. 15) that "they say" that 1 Peter was written from Rome, but there is strong, if not conclusive, evidence against this. In the first place it is most unlikely that Peter, for no reason whatever, should suddenly introduce a symbolical reference into the middle of a matter-of-fact context. Could this have been understood by his readers? If he had meant Rome, it is all but certain that he would have written Rome, which in such a connection would have involved neither difficulty nor danger. The thought of Rome as Babylon belongs to a later period and quite other realms of thought.

In the second place, the support which this would give to the tradition of Peter's episcopate at Rome is quite sufficient to account for its adoption by later writers when that tradition had become prevalent. Eusebius, in his *Chronicon*, dates the arrival of Peter in Rome in A.D. 42, which is quite impossible; and no greater weight attaches to his equivocal remark about Peter's epistle.

In the third place, the date of the epistle, which Alford places "about or soon after A.D. 63", is not favourable to the Roman origin. For if, as is probable, Peter ever visited Rome, it could scarcely be earlier than Paul's second imprisonment in A.D. 67; and if Peter was crucified under Nero, who died in June 68, this scarcely leaves time for the writing of his two epistles. Further, 2 Timothy was probably written from Rome about A.D. 67, shortly before Paul's martyrdom. Mark was not then in Rome, nor Silvanus; and if Mark did arrive soon after, it is probable that Timothy accompanied him (2 Tim. iv. 11). All this makes it the more improbable that 1 Peter was written in Rome at this time. In addition, Alford points out that the outlook in 1 Peter is rather that of a growing and widespread persecution than of one which had already reached its climax, as was the case in Rome in A.D. 67.

But if the objections to the Roman authorship are strong, so are those against the most popular alternative. Ancient Babylon was then in ruins, and although in the neighbourhood there was a considerable Jewish population, Josephus records that under Caligula (A.D. 37-41), these Jews were removed to Seleucia, and that 50,000 were slain (*Ant.* xv. 3. 1). There is no shred of evidence that Peter ever visited those parts; and had he done so, it would not be a likely spot in which to find Mark and Silvanus also. Eusebius (*H.E.* iii. 1) indeed quotes Origen as saying that "Peter *seems* to have preached the Gospel in Asia"; but the reference shows that this referred to the dispersion to whom the Epistle was addressed, for the words are "Peter seems to have preached to the Jews of the dispersion in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia and Asia", an evident inference from 1 Pet. i. 1. There is no evidence of a Christian community having existed at or near ancient Babylon in the first century, nor any tradition to support the conjecture that this was the place of writing.

As we turn to the third alternative, the fact that this locality was small and little known tells rather in its favour than otherwise. There is, moreover, some primitive evidence which, though slight, is free from objection.

A strong tradition links the name of Mark with Alexandria. According to Coptic tradition his father had lived in Egypt before coming to Jerusalem, which might account for his Latin name *Marcus* (cf. *Lucius* of Cyrene and *Simeon Niger*). Epiphanius

(*Haer.* 51. 6) states that Mark was sent to Egypt by Peter, and there founded the church of Alexandria. Eusebius (*H.E.* ii. 16) also tells of his coming to Alexandria, and adds (ii. 24) that he was martyred there in the eighth year of Nero and was succeeded in the bishopric by Hananias (or Annianus), "a man beloved of God and admirable in all things". H. B. Swete (*Gospel of St. Mark*, p. xix) cites other authorities for St. Mark's mission to Egypt, which he regards as superseding that to Colossae contemplated in Col. iv. 10.

According to Eutychius, Mark ordained twelve presbyters who were to elect and ordain a patriarch, and to fill up vacancies and keep their number up to twelve; and this arrangement appears to have continued up to the Council of Nicaea (Fowler, *Christian Egypt*, p. 196).

The statement that Mark was martyred in Alexandria in A.D. 62 is contrary to the evidence of Scripture, but that this was the date of the appointment of Annianus to the bishopric is quite probable, and there is nothing improbable in Mark's having been concerned in it. According to Coptic tradition Annianus was a shoemaker, Mark's first convert, who was ordained in A.D. 44 and left there as first bishop with three priests and seven deacons by St. Mark, who had in the meantime visited and founded other churches in Egypt.

There is nothing inconsistent with Scripture or early tradition in a visit to Egypt by Peter in company with Mark, or in more than one such visit. Such might have taken place after Peter's release from prison in A.D. 44, and before Mark's departure for Antioch in A.D. 47 (Acts xii. 17, 25). In Acts we lose sight of Peter after the Council of Jerusalem in A.D. 50, and of Mark after his journey to Cyprus with Barnabas. It is interesting to note that Mark would have met Lucius and other "men of Cyrene" at Antioch (Acts xi. 20; xiii. 1), who might well have coveted a visit from a member of the apostolic band. The collocation of Cyprus and Cyrene in Acts xi. 20 adds interest to this suggestion.

Had Peter started for Egypt from Palestine, he would certainly travel by the Pelusiatic route to Babylon. Mark, his "interpreter", who probably knew Latin as well as Greek, might have welcomed the opportunity of preaching the Gospel to the Roman legion stationed there.

It is worth noting that Basilides (c. A.D. 120), who taught

in Alexandria and visited various places in Egypt, claimed to be a disciple of one Glaucias, an "interpreter" of St. Peter (Clem. Al., *Strom.* vii. 17). Nothing further is known of this Glaucias, but as he seems to have lived in Egypt, this would create a link between Peter and that country. He might even have been Peter's interpreter to the Egyptian people.

When we turn to internal evidence, we observe first that "she who is in Babylon, elected together with you" (*ἡ ἐν Βαβυλῶνι συνεκλεκτή*) is generally taken, as in A.V., to refer to "the church", though it might mean some individual lady. In either case the phrase would be much more natural if Babylon were a small place, with only a few Christians, than if it were an enigmatical name for Rome.

Further, Alford regards it as "undeniable" that Peter had seen and was familiar with many of Paul's epistles (2 Pet. iii. 15f.), those to the Ephesians and Colossians being especially in view—a belief shared by many others. When the latter was written, Mark was apparently on the point of leaving Rome for a journey which might include Colossae (Col. iv. 10). Is it impossible that Paul commissioned him to take copies of these epistles to Egypt for Peter to see? This would have been a congenial task; for according to the accepted tradition Mark had just completed his Gospel, which embodied Peter's preaching, and he would be glad to return to the one whose disciple and interpreter he had formerly been. If Peter were then in Egypt, which Mark had already visited, this would be an additional attraction.

As to Silvanus (almost certainly the Silas of the Acts), he had been with Paul on his second journey, which terminated in A.D. 53. The interval between then and A.D. 63 would have been ample time for a visit to the churches to whom the epistle is addressed, such as may be implied in 1 Pet. v. 12, and for a report to St. Peter which formed the occasion for this letter.

Although these considerations are only possibilities, they nevertheless do render possible, and perhaps slightly probable, the suggestion that Babylon in Egypt is intended in 1 Pet. v. 13; and this probability is enhanced by the great difficulties attending the alternative interpretations. Moreover, when we remember the probability that Babylon was once the home of the holy family, and that through it must have passed many of "the

dwellers in Egypt" after their departure from Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, as well as the Ethiopian eunuch and other African converts, its claim must be conceded to be worthy of more consideration than it has received.¹

The writer of these notes makes no pretensions to theological knowledge. An interest in the subject was aroused by two visits to Egypt, and whilst there to the ancient fort of Trajan and the Church of St. Serge with its deeply interesting crypt; and the facts here presented have been gathered from various sources in the hope that some, possessed of wider and more exact knowledge, may throw more light on the questions which they raise.

G. T. MANLEY.

Redhill, Surrey.

¹ Cf. Deissmann, *St. Paul*, p. 303: "I have no certain explanation to offer why St. Paul, who on one occasion was taken for an Egyptian (Acts xxi. 38), never went as a missionary to Egypt. . . . Did he regard Alexandria, in consideration of its enormous Jewish population, as belonging not to pagan territory but to the 'circumcision', and therefore to St. Peter's mission field (Gal. ii. 9)?"