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LEVITICAL LEGEND FROM THE PERSIAN PERIOD

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SINCE the publication of Professor C. C. Torrey's *Composition and Historical Value of Ezra-Nehemiah* in 1896, and *Ezra Studies* in 1910, those scholars who seek accurate historical information in the so-called Memoirs of Ezra and in the second half of the book of Nehemiah have been occupied with self-defense. If literary criticism can convince, we must attribute this material to the Chronicler. Therefore, for accurate information, chronology, and the proper evaluation of events, it is wholly worthless. The following notes, however, call attention to some evidence that the Chronicler used tradition and current Levitical opinion, and so was not merely a composer of fiction.

The return of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem is the Chronicler's major theme, centering in the coming of some forty-nine thousand in the reign of Cyrus, and of Ezra and his followers in the reign of an Artaxerxes. These pilgrim caravans are magnificently exaggerated. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence of Jewish pilgrimage in Persian times to make it clear that the Chronicler is reporting genuine traditions which have grown fabulous in their oral transmission. In the first place, it is significant that the peculiar name Haggai first appears in this period. The root meaning, "to make a pilgrimage," "to keep a pilgrim feast," is familiar in various Semitic languages; the Arabic **حَجَّ** is a title conferred upon one who has performed a major pilgrimage. As

a Jewish name the form Haggai (or Haggi?) also occurs in the Elephantine Papyri eleven times as names of different individuals.¹ It is noteworthy that this name, not previously found in extant literature, in the fifth century becomes so common; it points to the growing importance and dignity of pilgrimage in Judaism.

Zechariah has an important message for a group of pilgrims just come from Babylon, and he believes that more will come in the future who will help in the rebuilding of Zion.² Nehemiah because of his meeting with pilgrims recently returned from Jerusalem bewails the fate of his sacred city, and makes a journey there himself, armed with a royal *firman* for the repair of the wall.³

In the finer imagination of poetry, the prophecies contained in the latter half of the Book of Isaiah—which I take to be a product of the late fifth century—describe the joys of the Jerusalem-bound pilgrims. The hills and the mountains at the Lord's command shall be made level, the wilderness shall become a safe pathway, there shall be abundance of water, even rivers in the desert, and food for those who journey; the march shall be triumphant, like the coming of the Israelites out of Egypt; even the sea shall not be a barrier.⁴ The beauty of the hope of these homeward turned exiles is known perhaps as familiarly as any thought from Scripture.

It is quite possible that the poem incorporated in Is. 2 2-4 and Micah 4 1-5 comes from somewhat the same time. Its picture is consistent with that found in the latter part of the book of Isaiah.

The likeness of this ideal return to Jerusalem to the marvellously guarded Exodus from Egypt is the more striking when it is recalled that while these poetic comparisons of the Jerusalem return were being composed, the Priestly Document

¹ As printed by A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B. C.*, Oxford, 1923.

² Zech. 6 10, 15.

³ Neh. 1 f.

⁴ Is. 40 3-5; 41 17-20; 44 26-28; 46 12 f.; 52 1-10; 58 18; 60; 61 4 f.; 62; 66. Cf. various Pss., as, e. g., 87.

of the Hexateuch, with its descriptions of the glorious crossing of the Red Sea and the providential guidance of the Israelites in the Wilderness was being put into its present form. Thus the Zionists of Babylon idealized their own Exodus.

Also significant is the number of Pilgrim Psalms in the Psalter, the processions, the thrilling descriptions of the events of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, all told in much the spirit of Second Isaiah; and the joy of arrival in the Holy City, the bringing of vows to the Temple, and the mystic satisfaction that the pilgrims found in the service of the Temple.⁵ That these Psalms cannot be convincingly dated does not prevent their being accepted as evidence for the growing custom of pilgrimage in the Persian Period, for, whatever age produced them, their thought was acceptable and caused their preservation.

Some of the interpolated sections in the prophetic books, which of course can not be satisfactorily dated, in their most exalted fancies picture the sifting of the people from the nations,⁶ the return from abroad,⁷ the dividing of the Nile for the coming of those from Egypt, just as the Red Sea had once been divided,⁸ the way through the wilderness,⁹ and the highway to Zion,¹⁰ all in contrast to the feeble population of Jerusalem.¹¹ One writer, perhaps among the latest, conscious of the unfulfilled ideal of the Return, speaks of the coming of Pilgrims to Zion *one by one*.¹²

Religious festival is the usual goal of pilgrimage. The Chronicler, in his legends of the birth of Judaism, describes the rise of certain Jewish festivals to greater prominence: the renewal, as he considers it, of the Feast of Tabernacles,¹³ of Passover and Unleavened Bread,¹⁴ and of all the set feasts;¹⁵ and the occasional festivals of the Founding¹⁶ and Dedication¹⁷

⁵ Pss. 66 6; 66 4 (cf. 24 7-10); 68 7; 74 18; 77 20; 78 (especially vv. 18-20); 84 5-8; 95; 96 10-13; 98 7 ff.; 107 2-8; 114; 136 14 ff.; *et passim*.

⁶ Amos 9 10.

⁷ Is. 11 11.

⁸ Is. 11 15.

⁹ Zech. 10 8-12.

¹⁰ Is. 34.

¹¹ Mic. 4 6.

¹² Is. 27 12.

¹³ Ezra 3 4, and Neh. 8 9-18.

¹⁴ Ezra 6 10-22.

¹⁵ Ezra 3 6.

¹⁶ Ezra 3 8-12.

¹⁷ Ezra 6 16-18.

of the Temple (the latter, though in Aramaic, Torrey assigns to the Chronicler), and of the Dedication of the Wall.¹⁸ These legends of the rise of the great feast days we have only upon the Chronicler's authority; but because the Jewish festivals had received a vigorous new life when first Judaism came into clear historical light these narratives are credible tradition.

In the Chronicler's scheme of history, the continuous stream of pilgrimage is concentrated into two gloriously exaggerated expeditions. Just as the Pentateuchal narratives dramatize the development of the Law as if it were the work of one man, this later author dramatizes the legends he knows concerning the Persian Period. In spite of his peculiar theory of *the Return*, other sources substantiate his tradition that there was an important Zionist movement during the Persian Period. The Chronicler, therefore, is not composing fiction, but is recording valuable Levitical legend.

Through the influence of returning pilgrims, the population of Jerusalem acquired a new character. The Chronicler's story is that Nehemiah found an inadequate population in the city, and that he accordingly cast lots among the people to bring a tenth into the Holy City. "And the people blessed all the men that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem."¹⁹ Evidently the rewards of living in the Holy City were sentimental rather than material. The story goes on to say that part of these people fled to the country for lack of support.²⁰ A tax was therefore instituted to make it possible for the Levites to return.²¹ Strict rules were made regarding Sabbath observance,²² and against mingling with the less religious people outside,²³ for Jerusalem must be truly holy. Such is the Chronicler's description of how Jerusalem's inhabitants became Holy; other literature confirms the story in its broader outlines.

Nehemiah's difficulties with Sanballat and his friends were part of the early estrangement of the citizens of the Holy City from the People of the Land. The repaired city wall served

¹⁸ Neh. 12 37-47.

¹⁹ Neh. 11.

²⁰ Neh. 13 10 ff.

²¹ Neh. 13 10-12.

²² Neh. 13 16-21.

²³ Neh. 13 23-26.

to isolate the pious Zionists from their neighbors. In view of the frequent coming of pilgrims from abroad, and also in view of the friction between the inhabitants of the city and other Palestinians, Temple support must necessarily have come rather largely from foreign Jews. Neh. 2 7-9, which is good history, tells of a royal order upon a Persian official to help support Nehemiah's work at Jerusalem. Neh. 10 32 f., regarding the Temple Tax, may be wrongly assigned to Nehemiah's accomplishments, but it is essentially true: it is supported by the Priestly Document²⁴ which, in its present wording, because it demands a half shekel instead of a third, as in Nehemiah, must be a later statement of the Law than that in the Chronicler's tradition. The other legends from the Chronicler about the bringing of Temple support from abroad are in their setting and strange exaggeration quite impossible;²⁵ as legendary reflections of real history they are, however, made reasonable by the corresponding passage in the Memoirs of Nehemiah and by the Priestly Code's corroboration of the Temple Tax legend.

Cities whose predominant interests are religious rather than commercial, and whose prestige makes them the goal of the pilgrimages of the pious, are ultra-conservative of ancient ritual and custom. For example, an intellectually alert Muslim can probably modernize his religious thinking elsewhere, but certainly not in Mekka. The Priestly Code, which is the product of Jerusalemite Judaism of the Persian Period, contains just such fossils of former ritual as we should expect from the community whose legends the Chronicler records.²⁶

Also, if the account of the conscript population is valuable legend, we may suppose that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were poor. People in prosperous circumstances cannot readily be persuaded to move. The Psalms, which must reflect the ideals of the age in which they were collected, frequently

²⁴ Ex. 30 11-16; cf. Nu. 3 45-51.

²⁵ Ezra 1 7-11; 3 7; 7 12-24; 1 Esdras 4 50-57.

²⁶ Lv. 12; 16; Nu. 6 12-21; cf. G. F. Moore, "The Rise of Normative Judaism," in the *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. xvii, no. 4, pp. 307-374.

describe the righteous remnant of Zion as very poor in contrast to their rich neighbors.²⁷ Those who expressed their piety by living in the Holy City, the Chronicler's legend says, did so at the expense of any prospects of wealth.²⁸ That such a population could find either means or courage to continue, however, must have been due to the constant coming and going of pilgrims. (Some scribes, perhaps, as an addition to the book of Micah implies,²⁹ thought that the poverty was only a result of sin.)

There is more or less literature which shows the ideals of this new community. Hatred of the People of the Land, especially of the Edomites, Ammonites, and Samaritans, was bitter;³⁰ possibly these neighbors had found opportunity to tax or to rob the pilgrims who passed their way.³¹ Psalmists described the purity of character required of those who might live in the Holy City.³² Others referred to the factions within this group, to be expected, perhaps, as the necessary business encroachments conflicted with the religious tranquillity of the city.³³ But a poet's shock at the irreligiously quarrelsome only emphasizes his high ideal for Zion. One Psalm breaks out in heartfelt appreciation of the people's unanimity.³⁴ The Chronicler in his history of pre-exilic times showed a similar attitude toward Jerusalem.³⁵

²⁷ Pss. 9 10; 10 2, 9; 14 6; 17 14 f.; 22 10-12, 20; 34 2, 6, 9 f.; 37 11, 14, 18, 29; 40 17; 41 1-3; 49 6-12, 16; 52 7; 62 10; 65 4; 68 14-17; 69 7-10, 29, 33 f.; 70 5; 72 2, 4, 12-16; 73 3-7, 12, 17; 74 10, 21; 82 3 f.; 86 1 f.; 109 17; 109 22, 21; 112 9; 113 6-8; 132 15 f.; 149 4.

²⁸ Neh. 13 10-14.

²⁹ Micah 7 12 f.

³⁰ Is. 63 1-6; Pss. 60 6-12; 74 12 (cf. Eccles. 50 26); Is. 34 2; perhaps Obadiah; Is. 11 13 ff.; Amos 9 12; Joel 4 4; the Chronicler, *passim*.

³¹ The story of God's protection for the company of Ezra may imply that there was a temporary truce for pilgrims, or at least that the Chronicler thought that there should be such a truce. History gives an example of this sort of thing in connection with the great festival at Mekka.

³² Pss. 15; 17 14 f.; 24 3 f.; 26 5 f.; 46 4.

³³ Pss. 55 9-17; 101 8; cf. Neh. 13 15-22.

³⁴ Ps. 133.

³⁵ 2 Chr. 5; 11 12 ff.; 15 6-12; 30 1-5; cf. *cetera*.

In conclusion: It seems that the Persian Period was not only a time when Jewish Pilgrimage became a more important rite, but also when the population of the city of Jerusalem acquired a peculiarly pious quality. Whether or not the Chronicler's story of a conscript citizenship is strictly fact, at least it is a legend containing some credible truth, not merely the author's fictitious composition. The Persian Period of Jewish history is prehistoric in somewhat the same sense that the Mosaic Age is prehistoric. And much as the J Document of Exodus and Numbers relates the legends about Moses, the Chronicler tells the legends current in Levitical circles about the origins of the aristocracy and of the great pilgrimage festivals.