

The Exile

By Father Felix, O.F.M.Cap., L.S.S.

Catholic Truth Society of Ireland No. ctsidd1123 (1941)

INTRODUCTION

(4 Kings 17; 24; 25; 1 Paralipomenon 5; Jeremias 29; 31; 40; 52).

Mass deportations [Formerly *captivity* (from the Vulgate Latin *captivitas*, e.g. in Psalm 84, 2) was the word used; of late it is the vogue to use *exile*. Exile is a better word—they were not gaoled prisoners; and yet exile is too mild—they were forcibly exiled. In St. Matthew 1, 11-12 we have *transmigration*, where the word in the Greek original means exactly *deportation*. (LEXICON GRAECUM NOVI TESTAMENTI. Auctore Francisco Zorell, S.J.)] of conquered nations were part of the imperial policy of ancient Assyria and Babylonia. It was a cruel system, but very effective. People who were forcibly exiled in scattered groups tended to lose their sense of unity; while the inhabitants of the new country—loyal to the empire, would act as a check on national aspirations. Then there was always strict supervision.

The Assyrians (noted even among the ancients for their cruelty) carried the policy to its extreme: no people deported by them survived as a nation; the people of Israel were absorbed. Not so with Babylonia; the people of Juda retained their national consciousness in exile.

Not all were deported—only the flower of the population: “all the princes, and all the valiant men of the army ... and every artificer and smith: and none were left but the poor sort of the people of the land” (4 Kings 24, 14; 1, 11) [This is confirmed from Assyrian bas-reliefs. JERUSALEM FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO A.D. 70. By George Adam Smith, D.D., LL.D. London, 1908. Volume II, page 268.].

ISRAEL

There were two deportations from the northern kingdom. In 734 B.C. Theglathphalasar III exiled the tribes of Ruben, Gad and Manasses to Lahela (or Hala) and to Habor (i.e., the district around the river Chobar), and to Ara, and the river of Gozan (1 Paralipomenon 5, 26). In 721 B.C. Sargon II deported 27,280 from Samaria to “Hala and Habor by the river of Gozan in the cities of the Medes” (4 Kings 17, 6—in Hebrew ‘to Hala on the Chobar, the river of Gozan; and to the cities of the Medes’).

In 720 B.C. Sargon II transplanted to Israel other conquered peoples “from Babylon and from Cutha and from Avah (Babylonian towns), and from Emath (in Syria), and from Sepharvaim (Sippara, on the Euphrates—northwest of Babylon)” (4 Kings 17, 24). An inscription from Khorsabad tells of another plantation of Arabians in 715 B.C.—also by Sargon II.—These planted peoples brought with them their several forms of idolatry. For their adoration of created things God punished them by sending a plague of lions. Then they appealed to the king of Assyria who sent them a Hebrew priest from among the exiles. This priest came to Bethel and taught them to worship the True God.

But while paying external cult to God they continued to worship their idols. From this hybrid people with their hybrid religion sprang the Samaritans (4 Kings 17), to whom there is frequent reference in the Gospels.

JUDA

There were four deportations from the kingdom of Juda—all by Nabuchodonosor: in 604 B.C.; in 597 B.C.; in 586 B.C.; and in 581 B.C. (Jeremias 52, 30). Those thus deported were planted in colonies in various places in the Babylonian empire. Jeremias 52, 28-29 gives the number deported in 597 B.C. as 3,023; but 4 Kings gives it as 10,000. The discrepancy is probably this: Jeremias speaks only of men of military age; 4 Kings includes men of every age and condition. The total number of exiles from Juda, therefore, would be about 15,000 men with their wives and children.

The Books of the Old Testament which treat of the Exile are: Tobias; Ezechiel; Daniel; Esdras I; Esther; Esdras II (also called Nehemias); Aggeus; Zacharias; Malachias.

CHAPTER I. — THE EXILE (734–538 B.C.)

(Tobias; Psalms 101; 136; Baruch; Ezechiel; Daniel; 4 Kings 25, 27-30).

The theatre of Sacred History now changes from Palestine to the lands of the Exile. Our only source of information for the exiles of the Northern Kingdom is the Book of Tobias [The author of the Book of Tobias is unknown; and the date of its composition is uncertain—probably between 600 and 500 B.C. The original Hebrew text is lost; and our Vulgate version is from an Aramaic text.], which gives the history of one family.

Tobias, of the tribe of Nephtali, was deported to Ninive in 721 B.C. by Sargon II. [The text has Salmanasar; but probably this is a copyist's error for Sargon.] His wife Anna and their son also named Tobias accompanied him into exile. Tobias was always a virtuous man. In the homeland he never adored the golden calves in Bethel and Dan, but always went to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple. In Assyria he would not eat food forbidden by the Law although many of his compatriots did. His virtue won for him the favour of the Assyrian king; and he was permitted to move freely. He used this privilege to visit the various scattered groups of Israelite exiles and to remind them of the truths of revelation.

One of these visits of Tobias was to Rages in Media, where he found a certain Gabelus of his own tribe of Nephtali in want. Tobias lent Gabelus ten silver talents for which Gabelus gave him a written receipt and promise of repayment.

The condition of the exiles was changed for the worse when (in 704 B.C.) Sargon II was succeeded by Sennacherib. After his failure to take Jerusalem in 701 B.C. Sennacherib vented his rage on the hapless exiles of Israel. Tobias helped his persecuted countrymen—he fed the hungry; he clothed the poor; he buried the dead victims of Assyrian hatred. When the king heard of this he ordered Tobias to be slain; and Tobias with his wife and son had to leave their home and go into hiding. In 681 B.C. when Sennacherib was murdered by his own sons and succeeded by Asarhaddon (one of them) Tobias was able to recover his home and property.

Tobias was afflicted with blindness by a strange accident (Tobias 2, 10-11); and his patience under this trial is compared with that of Job the Patriarch.

Tobias sent his son from Ninive to Rages to receive the debt from Gabelus. There had been great developments in Media since the money was borrowed. The tribes of the Medes (an Aryan people) had become a united nation from 712 B.C. under their king Deioces; and before his death in 685 B.C. they had completely freed themselves from Assyrian domination. This made the journey of the younger Tobias difficult because relations were strained between the two countries—Assyria and Media. God sent the Archangel Raphael in human form to accompany him. At Ecbatana they stayed in the house of Raguel, a cousin of the elder Tobias. Tobias the younger married Sara, the daughter of Raguel. During the marriage festivities which lasted fourteen days the Archangel went to Rages; received the money; and brought Gabelus back to Ecbatana to join in the festivities.

Tobias was concerned for his parents who were counting the days since his departure: and therefore he set out for Ninive without delay, bringing his wife and her marriage dowry. She was an only child, and her dowry was the half of her father's property "in menservants, and womenservants, in cattle, and in camels, and in kine, and in much money...." (Tobias 10, 10).

At Charan the Archangel and Tobias went forward leaving Sara and her retinue to follow leisurely. The mother of Tobias was watching for his return, and when she saw the two travellers in the distance she hurried to tell the good news to her husband. "Then the dog which had been with them in the way, ran before, and coming as if he had brought the news, showed his joy by his fawning and wagging his tail" (Tobias 11, 8)—the presence of this delightful little note shows that we have here authentic history; and also it shows that such embellishments to the narrative are not outside the scope of inspiration. Helped along by a servant Tobias went out to meet his son; and both wept for joy. The Archangel (whose name in Hebrew means 'the healing of God') cured the elder Tobias of the blindness which he had suffered so patiently for four years. After a week Sara and her servants reached Ninive. The friends of Tobias gathered to congratulate him and his son; and there was a week of high festival.

Tobias the elder lived for forty-two years longer; and he had the happiness of seeing his great-grandchildren. Before his death at the age of a hundred and two years he called to him his son and his seven grandsons. He foretold the destruction of Ninive, and he commanded them to leave it when Anna (his wife) should die. Anna died; she was honourably mourned and buried in Ninive with her husband; and then Tobias the younger with his children and grandchildren went to live at Ecbatana. He continued the good religious tradition of his family and died piously at the age of ninety-nine years.

With this charming story of Tobias the history of the Northern Kingdom and of the schism is ended. Most of the exiles from Israel remained abroad; the few of these who did return united with those of Juda. Henceforth the Chosen People of the Old Law will be known as the Jews—from the Hebrew word 'Yehudim'—people of Juda.

“BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON...” (Psalm 136)

For the history of the exiles from Juda we have more plentiful evidence. The sacred poetry of the time gives a vivid picture of the hardship they suffered in Babylon at the beginning of the exile—their sense of isolation in an alien land, among a hostile people who spoke a strange language: "I am become like to a pelican of the wilderness: ... to an owl among ruins ... as a sparrow on the housetop. All the day long my enemies reproach me..." (Psalm 101, 7-9). They missed their picturesque homeland of Palestine with its varied landscape and its sacred associations. When they

came together to pray by the canals which irrigated the plains of Babylonia it was in a dejected mood. Their harps hung silent on the poplar trees; and they wept for grief and anger at the departed glory of their ruined Capital and its Temple: "Upon the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept: when we remembered Sion: ... If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! ... O wretched city of Babylon, blessed shall he be who shall repay thee for what thou hast done to us" (Psalm 136, 1..5..8).

The exiles had great difficulty in remaining loyal to the true religion. The Babylonians were a very religious people after their heathen fashion, and everywhere splendid temples for the worship of their false gods compelled attention. The heathen idea of the time was that each country had its own special gods; in war these gods fought for their respective peoples, and the stronger prevailed. Again, adoration of the gods of the conqueror nation was demanded from the conquered under penalty of treason. The prophet EZECHIEL worked with great zeal and with great success for the spiritual welfare of the exiles of Juda from 593 to 571 B.C. JEREMIAS (himself an exile in Egypt) sent his devoted secretary, the prophet BARUCH, to hearten them with a prophecy of their return; and to warn them against worshipping the gods of Babylon.

DANIEL

After a time the condition of the exiles was improved; and the Book of Daniel [Of the fourteen chapters of the Book of Daniel, chapters 7 to 12 inclusive are prophetic; chapters 1 to 6 with 13 and 14 are historical. These historical chapters are our most valuable source for the Babylonian exile. The order of the chapters of Daniel is disturbed in our version; it should be: Chapters 1, 13, 2, 4, 3, 5 ... to 12; and the last verse of chapter 13 should be the first verse of chapter 14.] describes them as having their own courts of justice, a great measure of freedom, and (as in Tobias) a certain amount of property. It was Babylonian policy to appoint over the colonists governors of their own race who had been trained in Babylonian law and usage. Accordingly, Nabuchodonosor commanded Asphenez, one of the courtiers, to choose from the Jewish exiles four young men of noble birth, intelligent and of good physique. The prophet DANIEL, who was already famous among his own people for supernatural wisdom, was chosen; and with him three virtuous youths Ananias, Azarias and Misael. They were trained in the court of Babylon for three years. There they observed faithfully the divine law; [Some scholars maintain that Daniel is the author of Psalm 118.] and God favoured them with great wisdom and miracles. By their influence with the kings they were able to protect both the spiritual and the temporal interests of the exiles.

For interpreting a dream for Nabuchodonosor Daniel was promoted to a position of high authority; and this stirred the envy of the Babylonian courtiers. They had him cast into a den of lions; but he was miraculously saved.

Another dream Daniel interpreted as being prophetic of Nabuchodonosor's temporary madness. At the height of his prestige the king was filled with pride in his capital city—one of the seven wonders of the world: "Is not this the great Babylon, which I have built to be the seat of the kingdom, by the strength of my power, and in the glory of my excellence?" (Daniel 4, 27). As he spoke these words he was suddenly seized with the form of insanity known as lycanthropy. Persuaded that he was a brute animal he adopted animal habits and instincts; and for seven years he lived like a beast in the open. Then he recovered his sanity and was reinstated as king.

FALL OF BABYLON

Nabuchodonosor died in Babylon in 561 B.C., and was succeeded by his son, Evil-Merodach (561-559 B.C.). King Joachim (or Jechonias) had languished in prison since 597 B.C. He was freed by the new king of Babylon, and given a place of honour at the royal court. The people soon rose in revolt against Evil-Merodach because of his extravagance and his contempt for Babylonian law and religion. His brother-in-law, Neriglissar, assassinated him and succeeded to the throne (559-555 B.C.). Neriglissar died, and was succeeded by his infant son, Labosoardach, who after nine months was slain by the courtiers. One of these, Nabonidus, then became king (555-538 B.C.). As was customary with usurpers, Nabonidus took a wife from the royal family—in this case a daughter of Nabuchodonosor; and their son, Baltasar (or Belshassar) was associated with his father in the government from 540 B.C. (Daniel 5, 16) [For long it was triumphantly asserted that Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon and that there was an error in Daniel 5. Modern discoveries have vindicated the Prophet: Baltasar was co-ruler with his father, and is correctly styled king. Ironically the explanation was to be found in the same chapter 5 (verses 7 and 29)—where Daniel was promoted to be *third* in the kingdom. Why not second, as Joseph in Genesis 41, 40? Because Baltasar had the second place.].

Meantime Cyrus the Great had become king of Persia in 559 B.C. In 552 B.C. he conquered Astyages, king of Media; and united the two peoples—Medes and Persians, under his rule. In 546 B.C. he added all Asia Minor to his empire. Then he turned his arms against Babylon. Nabonidus was defeated in 539 B.C. and took refuge in Borsippa. Baltasar was in command at Babylon—a city which was believed to be proof against assault. Cyrus wisely chose a festival day when the defenders were ill prepared to resist. In the middle of their orgies a hand appeared writing on the wall of the banquet hall the Aramaic words: MANE; THEKEL; UPHARSIN. The king sent for Daniel who explained the divine warning: MANE—God hath numbered thy kingdom, and hath finished it. THEKEL—thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting. UPHARSIN—thy kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5, 26-28). The soldiers of Cyrus by a wonderful feat of engineering diverted the course of the Euphrates and entered the city by the dry bed of the river. Astyages [This is the “Darius the Mede” of Daniel 5, 31; 9, 1; 11, 1. BIBLICA. Volume 9 (1928), pages 316-340.], the conquered king of Media, was made regent of Babylon for Cambyes, the son of Cyrus.

Cambyes married a daughter of Astyages.

CHAPTER II. — ZOROBABEL AND ESDRAS: 538–457 B.C.

(1 Esdras; Esther; Aggeus; Zacharias; Psalm 125).

The “seventy years” which Jeremias [Jeremias 25, 12 and 29, 10. Seventy is a round number. The Exile is reckoned from 604 (the first deportation by Nabuchodonosor) to 538 or 537 B.C.—that is, sixty-seven or sixty-eight years.] had foretold as the length of the Babylonian exile had passed. Cyrus the Great of whom Isaias (44, 28; 45, 1) had prophesied was master of the civilised world. He was a shrewd and a tolerant statesman as well as a great military commander. In the year in which he took Babylon he issued a decree which was announced orally by heralds and also put in writing—permitting the return to their country of any Jews who wished to go. Jews who elected to remain in Babylon were exhorted to contribute money and goods to their countrymen who would return.

Permission was given to re-build the Temple of Jerusalem; and the Jews of Babylon were encouraged to contribute to this also.

The returning exiles had for leader Zorobabel [Pronounced Zor-ó-bábel.] (or Sassabassar—his Babylonian name). He was the nephew and adopted son of Salathiel, son of King Joachin (1 Paralipomenon 3, 17-19; St. Matthew 1, 12); and therefore heir to the throne of Juda. Cyrus handed over to him 5,400 sacred vessels of gold and silver which Nabuchodonosor had taken from the Temple in 586 B.C. Josue, the high priest, was among those who returned. The total number of those who returned with Zorobabel and Josue was 42,360, with their 7,537 slaves (1 Esdras 2, 64-65). When they reached Jerusalem their first care was to re-build the altar of holocausts in the ruins of the Temple; and before a year the sacrifices prescribed by the Law were being offered again as of old. Then they hired quarrymen and masons to re-build the Temple, and contracted with the Phoenicians for timber for the purpose. Psalms of thanksgiving and praise were sung for the ceremony of laying the foundation stone. It was a joyful occasion. But the older men who had seen Solomon's Temple were moved to tears, for the new Temple could never equal the old in wealth and splendour; and the sacred Ark of the Covenant would not be in its place in the Holy of Holies.

The Samaritans now came demanding that they should be allowed to join in the work of re-building the Temple. This, of course, meant that they would also join in the worship of the Temple. Zorobabel, Josue and the ancients considered this proposal and rejected it unanimously. Thereupon the Samaritans turned hostile; and by their machinations at the court of Persia they succeeded in having work on the Temple interrupted until 520 B.C.—that is to say, for fifteen years.

Meantime Cyrus was slain in battle in 529 B.C. His son, Cambyses, succeeded to the throne of Persia (529-522 B.C.). Pseudo-Smerdis, a usurper who pretended to be Smerdis—brother of Cambyses, reigned for seven months (522-521 B.C.). When the fraud was discovered he was murdered by the nobles; and one of these—Darius I, son of Hystaspes, became king of Persia (521-485 B.C.).

This change of dynasty was favourable to the Jews; and in 520 B.C. the prophet AGGEUS commanded them to resume work on the Temple. The prophet ZACHARIAS preached to the same effect. The satrap, Thathanai, came in person to enquire by whose authority the work was being done. The Jews gave him the names of Zorobabel and Josue, and told him of the decree of Cyrus. They had not the text of the decree; so Thathanai permitted the work to proceed, and sent a report to the king. A search was made; and the decree of Cyrus was found in the royal archives at Ecbatana. Darius then not only permitted the work to go on, but forbade interference with it under pain of death. After four years the building was completed in 516 B.C.; and in this latter year it was dedicated with great solemnity.

ESTHER

Darius was succeeded by his son Xerxes I (485-465 B.C.)—and to this reign is ascribed the history of Esther. [So Mgr. Pelt (*Histoire ...* Vol. II, p. 392); Doctor Hugh Pope, O.P. ("*Aids*" ... Vol. III, p. 182); R. Cornely, S.J. (*Compendium ...* p. 294); etc. Josephus (*Antiquities* 11, 6, 1) places it in the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.). The king in Esther is called Assuerus, which seems to have been a general name for the Persian monarchs; it is given to Cambyses in 1 Esdras 4, 6. The character of Assuerus in Esther fits exactly with what we know of Xerxes I from profane history. The Book of Esther in its original form was written by one who witnessed the events recorded in it

—probably by Mardochai. Official documents of the Persian monarchy are cited, so that it was written either in Susa or in Ecbatana.]

The king of Persia gave a great banquet in Susa (or Shushan), the royal winter residence; and during the festivities his queen, Vasthi, incurred his displeasure and was deposed. In the following year Xerxes chose as queen in her place an orphan Jewess named Edissa (now changed to Esther), niece and adopted daughter of Mardochai “who had been carried away from Jerusalem at the time that Nabuchodonosor, king of Babylon, carried away Jechonias, king of Juda ...” [i.e. in 597 B.C. This text creates a difficulty. Mardochai was made prime minister of Persia in the twelfth year of Xerxes (Esther 3, 7; 8, 2; 10, 3); i.e. in 474 B.C. So even granting that he was deported in infancy he would be 125 years old in 474 B.C. But the text may mean that he was the son of parents deported with Jechonias.] (Esther 2, 6). Her uncle had access to the palace because of Esther, and it happened that he discovered a plot to murder the king. He reported this to Esther; she warned the king; the plot was frustrated and the conspirators hanged.

Some years later Aman, a bitter enemy of Mardochai and of the Jews generally, was advanced to the position of prime minister of Persia. He prepared to destroy the whole Jewish nation; and he callously decided the month and the day for a general massacre of the Jews by drawing lots from an urn. He then obtained the king’s sanction for his design.

Mardochai brought the dreadful news to Esther in the royal palace, and she at the risk of her life went to Xerxes and obtained the reversal of the royal sanction given to Aman. Aman was hanged on the gibbet which he had prepared specially for Mardochai; while Mardochai was promoted prime minister in Aman’s stead. The Jews were authorised to defend themselves against their enemies; and on the day which had been appointed by lot for their destruction the Jews slew great numbers of their persecutors—including the ten sons of Aman.

To celebrate this victory the Jews instituted an annual religious festival which was called the feast of Purim (‘purim’ in Hebrew means ‘lots’)—so called from the lots drawn by Aman. This festival, also called “Mardochai’s day” (2 Machabees 15, 37), was celebrated on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the Hebrew month Adar; i.e., in the beginning of our March.

ESDRAS

And now there is a blank in Sacred History. Zorobabel, heir to the throne of Juda, disappears from the narrative; and there is no mention of his son. Palestine was a Persian satrapy or province ruled by Persian officials. The joy of the returning exiles was short-lived; gloom and despondency settled on the new colony. The difficulties of the situation were great; and their condition—spiritual and material—was pitiable. The contrast between the hope and the reality of the return from Babylon is the theme of Psalm 125.

ESDRAS

Esdras was a Jewish priest—a lineal descendant of the high priest Saraïas who was slain by Nabuchodonosor at Rebla in 588 B.C. (4 Kings 25, 14-23). He is also described as “a ready scribe in the law of Moses” (1 Esdras 7, 6); i.e. he knew the Law well and was able to teach it. [1 Esdras is a compilation from official documents and the memoir of Esdras himself. This compilation was made probably by an unknown inspired author later in time than Esdras.] In Babylon he heard of the

sad conditions in Jerusalem, and the news impelled him to undertake the leadership of another colony. He was high in the favour of the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, who in 458 B.C. gave him a written decree appointing him to go to Jerusalem with power to teach and to enforce the Law of Moses. The king also made a generous contribution to the Temple. All Temple officials were exempted from taxation.

Armed with this valuable document Esdras at once collected and organised all those Jews who were willing to accompany him. A list of 1,992 men is given (1 Esdras 8, 1-20).

The caravan set out from Babylon; and after nine days' travel they camped near the river and town of Ahava (modern Hit) where three days were spent in fasting and prayer to obtain the divine protection for the long and dangerous journey. After four months they arrived safely in Jerusalem; and when Esdras presented the royal decree to the satraps he was well received by them.

The leaders of the Jews gave Esdras a sorry account of the state of religion in Jerusalem. The exiles who returned with Zorobabel had begun to mix with the heathen peoples; to intermarry with them; and to adopt heathen moral standards. Esdras did penance publicly in the courts of the Temple for this. Soon he was joined by a great number of the people, who repented and promised to do whatever Esdras would require of them. Esdras commanded all the Jews under pain of excommunication to assemble in the Temple precincts in three days. He spoke on the gravity of the guilt of these mixed marriages so strongly condemned in the Law. The people repented and promised to put away the heathen women and their children. Esdras appointed two judges with two levites as secretaries to assist them. The ancients were present at the court, and Esdras himself presided. It took nine weeks to complete the work of the court. A list of offenders is given in 1 Esdras 10, 18-44; and with this list the Book abruptly ends.

It is highly probable that Esdras introduced other reforms also at this time.

CHAPTER III. — NEHEMIAS (445–400 B.C.)

(2 Esdras [2 Esdras is so called because it continues the history of 1 Esdras. It is also called the Book of Nehemias because it gives the history of Nehemias and contains the personal memoir of Nehemias. Probably the Book as it stands was written entirely by him.]; Malachias; Psalms 118; 145-150).

Nehemias was cup-bearer (or confidential personal servant) to King Artaxerxes I of Persia (465-424 B.C.). In 445 B.C. his brother, Hanani, came to Susa from Jerusalem and Nehemias enquired from him how matters fared with the returned exiles there. The reply was that Jerusalem was still largely in ruins; and that its walls and gates (so essential for the protection of a city then) were levelled and burnt. The people, too, were in a wretched plight: "in great affliction and reproach" (2 Esdras 1, 3). Nehemias was much affected by this. For several days he fasted and prayed—imploring God to grant him a favourable hearing from the king for the plan he had formed of returning to re-build Jerusalem.

Artaxerxes himself perceived that Nehemias was troubled, and he asked the reason. He was very sympathetic and he granted Nehemias's request to be allowed to go for a time as pasha (or governor) in order to re-build the Holy City. Nehemias also asked and obtained two letters from the king—one to the satraps of the provinces through which he would journey for a safe conduct; and one to the steward of the royal forests in Palestine for timber for the gates and towers of the city and

for his house. Finally, unlike Esdras who was too shy to ask this favour, Nehemias received from the king a mounted escort of soldiers to accompany him and his followers. The latter, it would seem, were few in number; merely his own servants.

Arrived in Jerusalem Nehemias rested for three days. Then quietly by night he rode round the city and surveyed the ruined walls. That done he summoned to him the leaders of the Jews; showed them the royal letters; and in his robust manner proposed that they should fortify the city: "Come, and let us build up the walls of Jerusalem...." (2 Esdras 2, 17). He then organised the citizens and distributed the work equally among the various groups.

Immediately the Samaritans began to harass the builders. Sanaballat of Bethoron, Tobias an Ammonite, and Gossem (or Geshen) an Arabian were the leaders of the opposing elements. At first they tried mockery—and the orientals are masters of mockery. Sanaballat spoke to Tobias so as to be heard by the workmen: the Jews were too helpless; it would require a miracle; it was futile to try to re-build Jerusalem from such utter ruins; anyhow the Persians would not allow them to have a walled city. Tobias replied: "Let them build: if a fox go up, he will leap over (in Hebrew—'break down') their stone walls" (2 Esdras 4, 3).

When their sarcasm had no effect they resorted to violence; and Nehemias had to station soldiers behind the walls by day to defend the builders, and watchmen by night to guard the work. Half of his men were thus withdrawn from the work; while the other half worked with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. Nehemias himself, his servants and his immediate followers slept in their clothes (4, 23).

The Samaritans next tried diplomacy. They sent a message to propose that Jerusalem should be the head of a league of the surrounding communes. Nehemias knew their real purpose which was to get him into their power by any means; so firmly but in diplomatic phrasing he refused to parley with them: "I sent messengers to them, saying: I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down, lest it be neglected...." (6, 3). Four times they sent; and each time Nehemias returned the same reply. They tried a fresh ruse: Sanaballat sent his servant secretly to Nehemias with a supposedly confidential letter. A rumour was current among the Gentiles, it ran, that Nehemias was preparing to revolt from Persia and set himself up as king of the Jews; and Gossem was a party to the circulation of the rumour. It was urgent, therefore, that Nehemias should consult with Sanaballat so as to prevent this false report from reaching the king of Persia. Nehemias calmly replied: "There is no such thing as thou sayest: but thou feignest these things out of thy own heart" (6, 8).

They bribed a Jew named Samaia who pretended that he was a prophet and advised Nehemias to take refuge in the Temple because (forsooth) his life was threatened by the Samaritans. If he had done this Nehemias would have lost the respect of the Jews. Noadiah and other false prophets tried to frighten him with similar reports; spies among the Jews recounted his every word and movement to Tobias. It was all to no purpose. The opposition of his enemies only strengthened the determination of Nehemias; and in fifty-two days the walls were completed—to the great dismay of the Samaritans who were forced to see the Hand of God in the project.

Nehemias next appointed levites to guard the approaches to the Temple, and watchmen at each of the gates of the city—these gates to be closed and barred at night. He directed Hanani and Hananias to make a census of the citizens; their work, however, was made easy by the timely discovery of the census taken by Zorobabel in 538 B.C. It was found that the citizens were too few for the size of the city. Some agreed to leave their homes in the country and to live in Jerusalem, and lots were drawn

to make up the required remainder. In all one tenth of the Jews were finally settled in the Capital. The walls were dedicated with grand religious ceremony—procession and sacrifices.

The Feast of Tabernacles had not been properly observed since the time of Josue. Nehemias revived it. A great concourse of people came to Jerusalem for the occasion. Esdras, of whom nothing has been said for a long time now, again appears taking an active part in this religious celebration. He had a wooden platform erected from which he and thirteen levites with him read the Law of Moses publicly. Levites among the throng maintained silence and attention; and from early morning until mid-day the people listened reverently. This was repeated every day during the week of the Feast.

Two days after the Feast of Tabernacles in another general assembly of the people the religious reform was completed. The people were dressed in sackcloth; they did penance for their sins; the covenant with God was solemnly renewed; they promised to keep the divine law, and in particular to avoid mixed marriages, to observe the Sabbath and the sabbatical year, and to contribute annually one third of a shekel [There is reference to this in the Gospel: “Doth not your master pay the didrachmas?” (St. Matthew 17, 23).] per head to the upkeep of the Temple (2 Esdras 10, 32).

SECOND REFORM OF NEHEMIAS

In 433 B.C. Nehemias returned to Susa. In his absence abuses again arose; and a second time he obtained Artaxerxes' permission to go to Jerusalem. We are not told what is the date of this second visit of Nehemias, or how long it lasted.

The abuses were of two kinds: social and religious. On the social side some of the Jews were selling their sons and daughters into slavery, others were mortgaging their land and houses in order to buy the necessities of life. Many also had sold their land as the only means left to them of paying the tribute levied by the Persian satraps. This evil had gradually increased, until now a great number were destitute while all the land was in possession of a few unscrupulous usurers. Nehemias was very indignant at this condition of things—directly at variance as it was with the social legislation of Moses. He struck at the root of the trouble—usury. The usurers were the nobles and magistrates of the Jews themselves. He summoned to him these latter, and spoke to them in stern terms with no mincing of words: he himself and his followers had striven with all their resources to buy back Jews who had been sold as slaves to Gentiles; must they now redeem Jews sold to their own people? He and his followers had lent corn and money without interest to many who were in need; the chiefs and magistrates had exacted usury. He had never during his twelve years as pasha accepted his salary for that office; he and his servants had worked gratis at the building of the walls; he had fed at his own expense a hundred and fifty of the leaders of the Jews besides the gentile tradesmen who were employed on the building. To this remonstrance they had no reply to give. Nehemias then ordered the restitution of all lands and houses and money which had been acquired by usury. They all promised to restore; and he made them swear an oath to fulfil their promise.

In the matter of religion there were many abuses to be corrected. The notorious Tobias had the permission of the high priest, Eliasib (they were connected by marriage), to use for merchandise one of the Temple storerooms. These storerooms were reserved for the requisites for divine worship. The tithes were not being paid to the priests and levites, and a great number of them had left Jerusalem. The Sabbath was being profaned. The Jews were again marrying Gentiles, and the children of these marriages were not taught the Law; nor were they able to speak Hebrew—the

language in which the Law was written. Nehemias at once attacked these several abuses. In a short time he had them reformed.

To the time of Nehemias belongs the last of the Old Testament prophets—MALACHIAS. He preached against abuses in the Temple worship; and against divorce; injustice; sorcery and perjury.

In the period of the return of the exiles is rightly placed the composition of Psalms 145-150. Psalm 145 has the names of Aggeus and Zacharias in the title. Psalms 146-147 (147 in the Hebrew) have references to the work of Nehemias: "The Lord rebuildeth Jerusalem: he gathereth together the dispersed of Israel" (146, 2): "He hath strengthened the bolts of thy gates, he hath blessed thy children within thee" (147, 13).

The order of the narrative above is the order given in 1 and 2 Esdras as these Books stand. This order was not questioned until 1890 when Professor A. Van Hoonacker proposed to place the reform of Nehemias before that of Esdras and to put the return of Esdras under Artaxerxes II (405-358 B.C.); that is to say in 398 B.C. Since then many Catholic writers have adopted the theory. [Notably Père Lagrange, O.P.; Mgr. Pelt; Doctor Hugh Pope.] The arguments put forward by Van Hoonacker have been critically examined, [BIBLICA. Volume 2 (1921); pages 424-447; also Ernesto Ruffini (Chronologia V. et N. Testamenti. Pages 38-48).] and his theory is by no means proven. The difficulties which it solves can be solved otherwise; and it raises its own difficulties—these latter as grave as the difficulties which it solves. Thus, for one example, Esdras, who worked with Nehemias in 445 B.C. would be a very old man to lead back a caravan of exiles in 398 B.C.—the seventh year of Artaxerxes the *Second*.

In these circumstances the traditional order has been retained here except that 2 Esdras 5 has been placed in the second mission of Nehemias; that is, after 2 Esdras 13, 7. This seems to be required by 2 Esdras 5, 14.

CONCLUSION

1. Beneath the historical causes which led to the downfall of the Hebrew kingdoms and the exile of the Hebrew people there was a deeper meaning and a divine design. This design was threefold. Firstly, the exile was a punishment for the sins of the people (Tobias 3, 4). Secondly the exile was the means of restoring the nation. The punishment was not vindictive, but corrective; it was not intended to destroy, but rather to reform them. The germ of the future Messianic nation went into exile and returned with Zorobabel. The people who returned were purified spiritually by hardship; and never after the exile was there a lapse into idolatry. The Holy City was restored and the Temple was re-built by these returned exiles. Thirdly, the Jews of the dispersion would prepare the Gentile world for the coming of the Redeemer (Tobias 13, 4). This was the mission especially of those who did not return. The harvest of their sowing was apparent at the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2, 9-11).
2. This most interesting period is rich in contrasts. In the defeat and disaster of the exile God's mercy to His afflicted people is shown in great prophecies and wonderful miracles. In the happier days of the return Zorobabel, Esdras and Nehemias—not of course without a special divine Providence, but still without miracles, accomplished their mission—"the most marvellous national *renaissance* which the world has ever known." [THE BIBLE AND THE MONUMENTS. By W. St. Chad Boscawen, F.R.H.S. 3 ed. London, 1896. Page 35.]

3. Because of the extraordinary prophecies and miracles recorded in the Book of Daniel the “critics” made this Book the object of fierce attack. Every advance in our knowledge of ancient history helps to vindicate the inspired record. The discoveries at Ur have provided us with the perfect historical background for the third chapter where the three companions of Daniel were cast into a furnace to be roasted to death for refusing to adore a statue erected by Nabuchodonosor. Proof of the existence of just such enormous statues has been found; and it is shown that Nabuchodonosor was an innovator in religion—substituting congregational worship for a ritual performed only by the priests. [UR OF THE CHALDEES. By Sir Leonard Woolley. London, 1929. Pages 137-138.]
-