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978-0-521-28557-5 - The Jewish and Christian World 200 BC to AD 200

A. R. C. Leaney

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Part I*1. Historical Outline: Exile, Restoration and
Diaspora

The period covered by this book is effectively *c.* 200 BC to *c.* AD 200; but to begin our outline at 200 BC would be to plunge into a situation which must be described very largely in the light of the previous centuries. In fact the Exile of the Jewish people (597 BC) provides a natural point at which to begin. For centuries this event has been regarded by Jewish scholars as beginning the period of the Talmud, and by others as beginning the formation of 'Judaism', thought of as a system of belief and practice founded on God's dealings with his people in the past.

The period therefore begins with a disaster; it was followed by a measure of recovery, but the disaster produced the permanent effect of the dispersion (Gk *diaspora*) of the Jewish people. Our outline must therefore begin with the Exile, Restoration and Diaspora.

EXILE

The biblical account of the events leading to the Exile is narrated in 2 Kings 17 and 23–5. In 721 BC the majority of the inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel were taken into captivity by the Assyrians, who, in their Annals, claimed to have transported 27,290 of them as booty (see *ANET*, p. 285). In 597, 587 and 582 much the same fate befell the southern kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, though Jeremiah's total of 4,600 (Jer. 52:28–30) probably refers to adult males only. The narrative says very little of the subsequent history; 2 Kings 25:22–6 tells briefly of the governorship on behalf of the Babylonian Empire by Gedaliah and of his assassination by Ishmael. The people remaining in Judah (or Judaea), fearing vengeance at the hands of the Babylonians, fled to Egypt. A fuller version of these events is given in Jer. 40–1. 2 Kings ends with a brief notice about King Jehoiachin, taken prisoner in 597 (2 Kings 24:15); in the thirty-seventh year of his captivity he was released by Evil-Merodach (Amel-marduk) when the latter succeeded Nebuchadrezzar, i.e.

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in 562 (2 Kings 25:27–30; cp. Jer. 52:31–4). The captivity of Jehoiachin is reflected in records on cuneiform tablets found on the site of ancient Babylon. They are known as the Weidner Tablets. (See *DOTT*, pp. 84–6; *ANET*, p. 308.)

RESTORATION

Subsequent events are difficult to follow. There was a return of exiles, after Babylon had fallen to the Persian king Cyrus, in about 538 BC, but of how many is unclear. There was a restoration of the Temple, but when, by whom, and how far successful – all are again unclear. To speak of the ‘Return’ implies too confident and too sweeping a claim, with its suggestion of a return of all exiles and a complete reversal of the disaster of the Exile. It is better to use the term ‘Restoration’, since there was eventually a restoration of the Temple, of its worship, and of the worshipping community centred upon it.

For information about this restoration we are dependent on the Chronicler, the scribe who brought together and no doubt wrote part of the books 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. The problems raised by his writing and by his material are many and complex. To discuss them adequately would demand more space than is appropriate in this volume; but the main facts and a few of the more important problems may be briefly indicated.

2 Chronicles does no more than allude to the exile of the northern kingdom’s inhabitants and in ch. 36 gives a condensed account of the last years of Judah before the Exile of 587. This narrative stresses the theme of divine punishment for apostasy, and the death or captivity of all the inhabitants at the final capture of Jerusalem, claiming this as a fulfilment of the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. 25:9–12). Gedaliah is not mentioned, and the comforting ending of 2 Kings 25:27–30 about Jehoiachin is also absent. Instead we have as ending a short passage (2 Chron. 36:22–3) to the effect that ‘in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia’ the Lord inspired Cyrus to proclaim that ‘the LORD, the God of heaven’ had given him ‘all the kingdoms of the earth’ and charged him to build a Temple for him in Jerusalem and that any who wished to go thither should do so.

The repetition of this passage at the opening of the book of Ezra (1:1–3) links what now appear as the books of Chronicles, covering the period of the monarchy, with the material concerning

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the restoration of Judah utilized in the opening chapters of the book of Ezra. It also provides a hopeful ending to the otherwise dark description of the downfall of Judah. The book of Ezra begins on the same optimistic note.

The subsequent course of events is far from clear. The material used in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is of mixed character and raises considerable problems in attempts at reconstructing the history. Two parts of Ezra are in Aramaic (4:8 – 6:18 and 7:12–26) and were apparently official documents. The remainder, in Hebrew, contains lists (Ezra 2, cp. Neh. 7; and Neh. 11–12), which are almost certainly not of the Chronicler's own composition. The same must be said of the first-person material in Nehemiah (1–2; 4:1–7; 5; 12:27–43; 13:4–31) whether actually memoirs of Nehemiah or not.

These textual difficulties are inseparable from the historical problems. For example, what was the character of the actual return from Exile? Did Cyrus authorize a mass migration, as seems implied by the form of his decree given in Ezra 1:2–4, or only the rebuilding of the Temple, as in 6:3–5? The famous Cyrus Cylinder (p. 21), which does not mention the people from Judah, suggests the latter, that is that he encouraged only the restoration of the Temple. What is known from elsewhere (including the Jewish historian Josephus – p. 76) makes it virtually certain that though a considerable number of people returned, and some in the course of time were able to go to and fro, the majority of the exiles remained permanently in Babylonia (p. 22). Another problem is how to date, relatively to one another and to known dates such as the rules of Persian kings, the two personalities Ezra and Nehemiah. Both are placed in the reign of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7; Neh. 2:1); if this is Artaxerxes I (465–424), Ezra is dated 458 and Nehemiah 445; but the lack of cross-references from the one to the other suggests that they were not contemporaries. Was then the Artaxerxes of Ezra Artaxerxes II (404–359), dating Ezra to 398? Many think that this is the case, but an important reference, Neh. 8, does make the two contemporaries, for in that chapter Ezra proclaims the law while Nehemiah is governor. Evidence from the Elephantine papyri (*Making*, pp. 38–40) seems to support the view that Nehemiah was active under Artaxerxes I in 445, and Ezra probably under Artaxerxes II, since they give names of persons known to be contemporary with each, and place them in these respective periods. But this evidence

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is not as certain as it was thought when first examined. For example, the papyri mention the name of Nehemiah's adversary Sanballat in circumstances fitting well with the date of 445 for Nehemiah; but the 'Samaria papyri' (discovered in a remote place near Jericho but apparently brought from Samaria) provide evidence of recurrence of the name of Sanballat, and of one bearing this name in the fourth century. (See F. M. Cross, *Biblical Archaeologist* 26 (1963), 3, pp. 120-1.)

One of the most important questions, perhaps the most important, is: When did the rebuilding of the Temple begin? Here the books of Haggai and Zechariah offer some evidence; Hag. 1:1-10, dating itself to 520, reproaches the people for living in houses with roofs while the Temple is in ruins. In ch. 2, in an oracle dated a month or more later, Zerubbabel the governor is encouraged to begin building, and Zech. 4:9 prophesies that Zerubbabel, who laid the foundation, will finish it. Ezra 3:8 is consistent with this (though perhaps suggesting a different date) but Ezra 1:8 and 5:14-16 suggest a beginning under the earlier governor Sheshbazzar, this attempt being apparently thwarted by enemies (Ezra 4:1-5). A probable interpretation seems therefore to be that the Chronicler has exaggerated both the numbers of those who came to Judah and their zeal in rebuilding the Temple, while retaining evidence which allows us to see this exaggeration at work. By the way in which he tells the story, he suggests that the worship of Yahweh and the future of his people lay wholly with those who returned to Judah and their descendants, and that the history of the Jews of Babylonia was of no importance. We shall see that this was to be disproved by events; indeed, it is necessary to restore the balance and in due course to give some account of the Jews in Babylonia and in other countries distant from Judah and from one another. This brings us to the Diaspora.

DIASPORA

The Greek word *diaspora*, which means 'dispersion', is often used to denote this phenomenon of the spread of the Jewish people to so many different places in the world. Dispersion suggests diffusion from a centre; such it was, for it was diffusion from Judah and Jerusalem. Respect for Jerusalem was never lost, but the sense of being a distant colony of a people whose true home was elsewhere was bound to disappear under the influence of the

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natural tendency to regard as home the place where one has always lived. Respect for Jerusalem did not discourage pride in, or loyalty to, local authority, even for religious matters. The book of Esther, for example, clearly belonging to the eastern Diaspora, at no point suggests any idea of return to Judah; its problems are centred on the life of Diaspora Jews in an alien and sometimes hostile environment.

For lists of places where Jews lived in the ancient world during the period of our study we can turn to Philo (p. 140) and the book of Acts. Philo gives his list in his *Legatio ad Caium* (281–2), beginning it with the country where he lived: ‘Egypt, Phoenicia and Syria, Pamphylia, Cilicia, most of Asia as far as Bithynia and remote corners of Pontus; and similarly in Europe, Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth and most of the Peloponnese Islands also contain colonies, e.g. Euboea, Cyprus, Crete.’ Asia is what we call Asia Minor. Philo has here apparently limited his world deliberately, for he omits Rome (which he visited) and remarks at the end of the list we have quoted, ‘I say nothing about the regions beyond the Euphrates.’ This famous river was a natural boundary, though not always recognized as a political boundary, between Rome, the great power in the west, and Parthia, the great power in the east during our period (see map p. xvii).

The list in Acts 2:9–11 is shorter but represents a wider spread. The first name reflects the Parthian supremacy east of the Euphrates from c. 140 BC to AD 226, the ‘Parthian period’ of Jewish history. The Parthian Empire extended over almost the same territories as the older Persian Empire and included the second, third and fourth countries in the list – Media, Elam and Mesopotamia, thus emphasizing that unlike Philo it gives pride of place to ‘the regions beyond the Euphrates’, and this means to Babylonian Jewry. This was the term used to denote the eastern Jewish communities which derived from ancient Babylon since the Exile; it shows consciousness of this origin, for Babylon ceased to be important politically in 539. The eastern countries are followed by Judaea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Cyrenaica, Rome, Crete, Arabia. The presence of Judaea in this list makes it look like one compiled by a non-Jewish historian who sought to answer the question: Where are Jews to be found? It is strange only in its context, which makes it part of an expression of astonishment from the mouths of a crowd in

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Jerusalem. This contrasts with Philo who prefaces his list by referring to Jerusalem as the spiritual capital of all these districts.

Our primary task in this historical outline is not to elucidate the story of the 'Return' from Exile, not even the details of the Restoration of life and worship in Judah, although that is part of the history of the most important land where Jews were to be found. It is rather to outline the history of the Jewish people from the sixth century BC onwards, wherever they happened to be; to describe their religious and social organization; and to summarize the literary activity associated with it. Our perspective is derived from the well-known concept of the Fertile Crescent and from a condensation of the lists of Philo and Acts. The exact shape of a crescent cannot indeed be maintained: it can be described from east to west, sweeping north from Babylonia through Mesopotamia, and south through Palestine to Egypt; but it must be imagined as throwing out an extension from its most northerly point westwards into Europe. The areas to be considered are Babylonia and Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, Syria and Phoenicia, Palestine, Egypt, Cyrenaica (see map pp. xvi-xvii).

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2. Diaspora: The Historical Background

MAIN PERIODS OF HISTORY

The traditional 'Persian/Greek period' of Jewish history is 539–140 BC and subdivides into: Persian Empire 539–333 (this latter date is approximate); Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great, c. 333 to 320; Seleucid period c. 320 to c. 140. The Parthian period has been traditionally held to extend from c. 140 BC to c. AD 226, when the Parthians were overthrown by the new Persian dynasty, the Sassanians. For Babylonian and Mesopotamian Jewry these divisions can be accepted as useful guides. For Jewish history in other parts of the world, dates shared with Greek and Roman history are more appropriate. (See the tables on pp. 221–5).

The Diaspora of the Jewish people took place within the context of historical events involving many different nations. These can be located easily in the Fertile Crescent and its westward extension, but before any account of the Diaspora is attempted, a very brief sketch of the main events is necessary.

In 520 BC, when our sketch begins, Darius I had established his position as king of Persia in spite of some disturbances; he ruled over a vast empire, which he had largely inherited from his predecessors Cyrus the Great and Cyrus' son Cambyses, and to which he had added. It stretched to the valley of the Indus on the east and embraced the whole of the Fertile Crescent, including Egypt and Libya, while the extension to the west included Asia Minor and Thrace. Persian power threatened, but as yet did not attempt to embrace, mainland Greece. Darius and his successors attempted to include it, but the effort proved that the Empire was too large to hold together the extremes of east and west. Failure to conquer mainland Greece led to the loss of Asia Minor and eventually to Greek counter-attack under Macedonian leadership. The enormous conquests of Alexander the Great of Macedon, leading a Greek army, inaugurated a new age. In 333 his victory at Issus enabled him to turn south through Syria, Phoenicia and

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Palestine to Egypt before the series of triumphal advances into Persia itself, for a brief spell transforming the Persian Empire into an even vaster Greek Empire. It was indeed a brief spell: Alexander died in 323, and the date marks the beginning of another age. The classical Greek period was closed and succeeded by an age which saw the gradual breakup of the huge oriental empire which had in turn been Babylonian, Persian and Greek. This new age witnessed the spread over a very great area of the influence of the Greek language and of miscellaneous Greek ideas, and for that reason might have been called Hellenic (for the Greeks called themselves Hellenes). The days of creative greatness, however, had largely gone, and the new civilization has always seemed to historians, perhaps unjustly, to be derivative, finding its inspiration in past models rather than in a creative spirit. For this reason the period which followed the death of Alexander has been called hellenistic.

Alexander's great empire was divided after his death between his generals. These have been often called the Diadochi (i.e. successors). Antigonus was left with Macedonia, whose history now hardly concerns us. By 285 Ptolemy ruled over a thin coastline, and accompanying islands, of south-western Asia Minor, Lycia, Cyprus, and above all Egypt. He was in fact Ptolemy I (304–283), founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty. By far the greatest area was ruled by Seleucus I (312–280), and consisted of the remainder of the large territories to the east which had been Persian, extending to the west coast of Asia Minor. Its administrative centre was Syria, with Antioch (founded in 300 BC by Seleucus) as its capital. For a few years after the death of Alexander the position of Phoenicia and Palestine was uncertain, but by the turn of the century they were securely part of Ptolemy's empire. This lasted until the Seleucid conquest of Palestine in 200–198.

Rivalry between Seleucids and Ptolemies constitutes the main background of events for the history of the Jewish people in the very poorly documented but important third century BC, until the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids brings a sharper focus and the books of the Maccabees give us the story from about 175 BC. By then Rome's involvement in the Middle East had already begun, after her conquest of Carthage in 202. Rome was culturally so deeply influenced by the Greece she conquered that from some points of view the period of her ascendancy could be included in the hellenistic period. The years 200 BC to AD 200, with

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which this book is concerned, are part of what is known as the Graeco-Roman period, and may themselves be called the hellenistic-Roman period. In this period Christianity emerged, and Judaism, in anything like the modern sense, became articulate and literary, producing at the end of the period the Mishnah (p. 197). Hellenistic-Roman also denotes most of the area embraced by the Fertile Crescent and its western extension across Asia Minor and Greece into Italy. Only one of the spheres inhabited by Jews lay outside the hellenistic-Roman area, being for this four-hundred-year period ruled by Parthia. This was the area of Babylonia and Mesopotamia.

This is the area with which we begin our outline of the Diaspora. When describing it and the other areas, we shall begin with a sketch of the history of the country and of its own culture, and then give some account of the Jewish people living in it.

BABYLONIA AND MESOPOTAMIA

Babylon and the Persian Empire

The Neo-Babylonian Empire (so-called to distinguish it from the early flourishing period *c.* 1830–1530 BC) lasted only from 626 to 539. Its conquest by Persia at this latter date did not altogether obliterate its culture or learning. It is now not easy to determine how much we owe to Babylonia, but the profession of scribe was the most typical among wealthier members of the community, and great scholarly activity was obviously necessary to produce and to preserve the considerable body of literature which has survived and which has helped to illuminate Old Testament studies. It is debatable how much these scholars discovered; for example it is known that they anticipated Pythagoras' famous theorem, but not whether they developed the knowledge which it implies. They certainly devoted much time and zeal to the collection and recording of magic lore and omens, a sphere in which the Greeks regarded them as experts.

The Jewish exiles lived under native Babylonian rule for only a short time. The conquest of Babylon in 539 was a relatively late event in the career of Cyrus, king of the Persians; they and he were newcomers on the power scene in this part of Asia round the Persian Gulf, which had for long been the empire of the Medes. In October 539 Cyrus was proclaimed king of Babylon,

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and he adopted its administrative organization. These facts witness to the pride which he felt in taking his place in the traditional line of supremacy in the area. He thereby conformed to the established custom of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and indeed corrected some of the eccentricities of its last king, Nabonidus. Cyrus was not in fact the first king of Babylon to send back the images of foreign deities to their native sanctuaries, a courtesy not only to them but also to the Babylonian deities whose temples they desecrated (Cyrus Cylinder, p. 21).

Cyrus (550–530) was one of the great kings of antiquity. He established a vast empire stretching from as far east as north-western India to as far west as Asia Minor and the Greek islands (which with the coastlands became the satrapy of Ionia). His son Cambyses (530–522) extended this empire to include Syria–Palestine and Egypt, so that almost the whole of the area, which we have described as the Fertile Crescent with an extension to the west but excluding Italy, became the Persian Empire, but with a further extension to the east. The years 522–520, following Cambyses' death, were marked by unrest in several parts of the empire which included Babylon and Palestine. Whether Zerubbabel, apparently the governor in Jerusalem and a grandson of Jehoiachin, was involved in this unrest remains obscure. (See Hag. 2:4–9, 20–23; Zech. 4:6–10.)

Darius I (522–486) showed great ability in establishing peace and his own position as king by 520 and he commemorated his triumph by a large trilingual inscription on a rock face at Behistun. It is unfair to his reputation that he should be known best as the king whose army was defeated by the outnumbered Athenians at Marathon in 490. This famous event reminds us of the fact that the Persian kings, largely because of attempted revolts by the Ionian Greeks, were drawn into over-extended lines of communication in trying to subdue not only Ionia but even mainland Greece. The destruction of Athens after the battle of Thermopylae in 480 was the work of Xerxes (486–465), son of Darius, whose huge army seemed more than adequate for the destruction of the whole of Greece. But the Persians lost the subsequent battles by sea and the delivered Athenians recovered to build not long afterwards on their Acropolis those monuments which speak of the emergence of a totally new world from that which the Persians had destroyed.

After Salamis (480) the Ionian revolt took a definite shape and