

CHAPTER 4

THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE

Safe arrival at Jerusalem by the returning exiles was immediately marked by the handing over of costly articles, money and priestly robes—had they been carefully treasured through the years of exile?—presumably to Joshua, the high priest, and his delegates (Ezr. 2: 68f., Neh. 7: 70ff.). It needs only a glance to show us that the text preserved in Nehemiah is superior, but the divergencies between them are not significant. It seems clear that the Chronicler abbreviated the text in Ezra. What is important is the statement in both books that “Some of the heads of fathers’ houses gave to the work”. This could be an underlining of the poverty of some of those who had returned, but it is more likely to have been a demonstrative refusal to contribute on the part of some. While it is again too hazardous to infer a reason for this attitude of mind, it is a clear warning of what was to come.

On the first religiously suitable day, the first day of Tishri (Ezr. 3: 6), i.e. the Feast of Trumpets and the civil New Year, they recommenced the sacrifices, cf. Exod. 40: 2, 1 Ki. 8: 2. Here too an almost casual remark in the old story throws light on what was to be. We are told, “They set the altar in its place, for fear was upon them because of the peoples of the lands” (Ezr. 3: 3). This can surely only mean that some of those that had returned—surely not the priests among them—had ceased under exilic conditions to see any spiritual purpose in sacrifices. They brought them now as a sort of bribery to ensure that God would protect them from their potential enemies. An element of textual difficulty hardly justifies us in changing the clause to its very opposite or deleting it altogether with Rudolph.*

There are many reasons why we cannot now envisage with any accuracy the exact task that faced the returned exiles in the rebuilding of the Temple. It is usual to contrast the approximately seven years needed by Solomon, with all the resources of his empire behind him (1 Ki. 6: 37, 38), with the not quite four and half years needed by the rebuilders (Hag. 1: 1, Ezr. 6: 15), in spite of their poverty and limited resources, once they had started work in earnest.

The present temple area, the *haram es-shefif*, is beyond a doubt to be regarded as mainly the work of Herod the Great. Hence we do not know how much preliminary work on the site had to be done by Solomon. This would not have to be repeated by Zerubbabel and Joshua. We do not know either whether any effort was made to restore the elaborate system of storerooms round the walls of the sanctuary (1 Ki. 6: 5, 6); probably not, though we must not forget that they figured in Herod’s temple.

* *Ezra und Nehemia* (1949).

There are, however, indications, especially Haggai's stress on timber (Hag. 1:4, 8), that the temple walls had not been razed to the ground. This would be the most likely interpretation of "When they came to the house of the Lord" (Ezr. 2:68), for the phrase seems to indicate at the very least an easily identified ruin. Probably the Temple had simply been set on fire (2 Ki. 25:9); the cedar panelling and roof would have burnt fiercely; the stone chambers round the walls would have collapsed as soon as the beams on which they were supported were burnt through; but the main building would have remained fairly intact. The special mention of cedars in Ezr. 3:7 has no bearing on the subject, because nothing less than timber of this type would provide the length to span the thirty foot width of the sanctuary and so support the roof. This view is not contradicted by the fact that the Chaldeans completely razed the walls and terraces that had come down from Jebusite times. The Temple was not the fortress it became later in the Inter-Testamental period.

The various mentions of the laying of the foundations of the Temple in Ezra do not necessarily speak against this interpretation. In the Aramaic section of the book (4:8-6:18) RSV, NEB have, probably correctly, eliminated the mention in 6:3, while in 5:16 the meaning of the original may well be more vague. Certainly in the Hebrew section the traditional rendering is much too definite in 3:6, 10, 12, where the concept of foundation is derived from the verb *yasad* without any object added. But in 2 Chr. 24:27 the Chronicler uses *yasad* for repairs which, however far-reaching, certainly did not involve rebuilding the Temple from the foundations up. Probably a solemn ceremony implying a new beginning is intended. The sorrow of those who had seen Solomon's building (Ezr. 3:12) is best explained, if it was already plain how far short the new sanctuary would fall of the glories of the former house.

Though the Chronicler does not say so in as many words, he clearly implies in Ezr. 3:8 that the work of building and in particular that of laying the foundation was carried through by Zerubbabel and Joshua. In fact the studied anonymity of verse 10 seems to veil a minor comedy.

We took leave of Sheshbazzar in Ezr. 2:63, where "the governor" must surely refer to him. He passes without trace from the story only to reappear unexpectedly in Ezr. 5:14-16, where it is remembered that it was he who laid the foundation. Unless we accuse the elders of Jerusalem of deliberate lying, there seems to be only one way of explaining the apparent contradiction.

Sheshbazzar was Cyrus' commissioner to take back the Temple vessels (Ezr. 1:8, 11), and there can be little or no doubt that he was also entrusted with the responsibility of seeing that the Temple was rebuilt, or at least that the work was started on it. Hence he will have laid the foundation, even as the elders of Jerusalem claimed, but he will probably have returned to Cyrus shortly afterwards. The relative soundness of the old masonry will have justified him in so doing. His return would explain the presence of Cyrus' decree at Ecbatana (Ezr. 6:2) instead of its being treasured up in the Temple archives.

Sheshbazzar, even though he was "prince of Judah", was a Persian official acting for a heathen king—note that his name is not mentioned in Ezr. 2—so we are entitled to see Zerubbabel and Joshua taking over, when Sheshbazzar

had discreetly withdrawn after laying the foundation, and repeating the ceremony. Only when a Persian satrap came nosing round (Ezr. 5:3) was it convenient and advisable to remember that it was Cyrus' representative who had begun the work.

The Samaritans

The returned exiles clearly expected trouble from their neighbours (Ezr. 3:3), but when it came, its form was obviously a surprise. The story begins by mentioning "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" (Ezr. 4:1), but as it develops, it becomes clear that only the Samaritans are intended. There is no evidence that others were at any time involved, for Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab (Neh. 2:19) were almost certainly officials in the service of Sanballat, governor of Samaria.

When Samaria fell in 723 B.C. at the end of the reign of Shalmaneser V, the new king Sargon continued the policy introduced by Tiglath-pileser III and deported the cream of the population. His inscriptions indicate a figure between 27,270 and 27,290 for those taken away. To take their place leading citizens from other recently conquered areas were introduced (2 Ki. 17:24). They rapidly adopted a highly syncretistic worship, which helped towards assimilation with the Israelites who had been left in the land. With the growing tension between Assyria and Egypt, which was to result in the conquest of the latter, Esar-haddon (681-669 B.C.) introduced new colonists (Ezr. 4:2), and Ashur-bani-pal (669-c. 627 B.C.)—"the great and noble Osnappar" (Ezr. 4:10)—had to supplement their number once again. One reason, at least, for this will have been their rapid assimilation with the remnant of the indigenous population. This was so complete that somewhat later they claimed to be Ephraimites, as do their descendants to this day.

When 2 Kings 17 was written* the Samaritans still maintained their syncretistic worship (verse 34), but they must have abandoned it not so long after, perhaps as a result of Josiah's reforming activities (2 Chr. 34:6). Commonsense tells us that if they had still been semi-pagans, the Jewish leaders would have used this as their strongest argument against their helping in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple.

There were doubtless two main motives behind the Samaritan leaders' request. On the one hand Josiah's thoroughgoing profanation of the traditional northern sanctuaries—Bethel (2 Ki. 23:15-20) is the example given in detail—had left Jerusalem the only site in the country with an unimpeachable history, for Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the Temple had been purely secular, involving no profanation of the site—this is implicit in its continued use, at least in measure, as a place of worship (Jer. 41:4f.), and in the silence about any service of purification or resanctification, when the exiles returned. Then too, if they helped in the rebuilding, they would have a say in its administration, and through it in the internal affairs of Judah.

* Certainly before the time of Evil-merodach (562-560 B.C.), cf. 2 Ki. 25:27-30, probably during, or even before the reign of Josiah.

Modern writers like L. E. Browne* and Norman Snaith† have criticized the Judean leaders in bitter terms for their lack of love. They have seen in the delegation loyal Jehovah worshippers from the remnants of the northern tribes rather than half-assimilated foreigners. There is, however, little to be said for such a view, and there are only few who would support it today. This is not to deny that the old separation between North and South probably still rankled.

There is no evidence of any wish to exclude the Samaritans from the worship of the Jerusalem temple, and indeed their right to worship there seems always to have been conceded, provided, of course, that they accepted the Judean claims for Jerusalem. It may be questioned also whether it would have been politic to accept the offer. They had been given the task of rebuilding the Temple by Cyrus, and their very presence in Judea was based on this task. A report that they were not carrying through their task might have compromised their whole standing.

The Results of Opposition

Once Sheshbazzar had returned to Cyrus, Judea had no governor at its head appointed by the Persians. It was merely a subsection of Samaria, whose governor was a subordinate of the satrap of "Beyond the River". Though this is often denied, it seems to be convincingly proved by the language of Ezra 5 and 6. Throughout, Tattenai neither names nor knows any governor. Indeed Ezr. 5:3f. definitely precludes the possibility of there having been any officially appointed person who could have been automatically held responsible.

It is true that Ezr. 6:7 does explicitly mention the governor of the Jews—not of Judah, as normal usage would lead us to expect—but this is omitted by B, one of the main MSS of the Septuagint and also by the Syriac. In addition the Aramaic text, as it stands, is impossible. It is much easier, therefore, to regard "the governor of the Jews" as a later addition, which in 1 Esdras 6:27 has been expanded to "Zerubbabel, the servant of the Lord and governor of Judea", an impossible reading for an official letter. 1 Esdras also inserts "Zerubbabel" in 6:29, corresponding to Ezr. 6:9.

Appeal may be made to Hag. 1:1, 14; 2:21, where Zerubbabel is called "governor of Judah", though this title is not given in Zechariah. We need not for a moment doubt that the inhabitants of Judah regarded Zerubbabel as their head, for he was the heir presumptive of the Davidic throne; hence they will have given him the honorific title of governor. Indeed the Persians themselves may well have regarded him as the *de facto* head of the Jewish community. But that did not give him any independent status vis-a-vis the governor of Samaria. This freedom seems to have come first in the time and person of Nehemiah, which indeed explains the bitter hostility he had to face.

The Samaritan landed proprietors—"the people of the land" (*am ha-'aretz*)—were able to intimidate the newcomers (Ezr. 4:4). In addition they were doubtless able to see to it that the grant from the royal treasury (Ezr. 6:4), which would have been taken from the funds of the satrapy, was with-

* L. E. Browne, *Early Judaism*.

† N. H. Snaith, *Studies in the Psalter*.

held. Their opposition was the more effective because much of Cyrus' attention was being given to wars in the east of his empire, while during the short reign of his successor Cambyses, the king's attention was absorbed by his conquest of Egypt.

We have already seen that there were disparate elements among those who returned, and that there were heads of fathers' houses who apparently had no interest in contributing to Temple funds. It is not surprising, therefore, that enthusiasm for the rebuilding rapidly evaporated, when the full costs fell on the corporate body of those who had returned.

There are many scholars who base themselves on Haggai, and to a less extent on Zechariah, and claim that this picture in Ezra is pure invention. They maintain that the failure to rebuild was purely due to lack of zeal and interest. They deny that any outside pressure was experienced, and they affirm that the work did not begin until the second year of Darius.

In practice we repeatedly find in the Old Testament differing evaluations of events when we read of them in the historical descriptions and then in the contemporary prophets. If we were to judge purely by the account in Kings, to say nothing of Chronicles, we should think that the reformations of Hezekiah and Josiah were outstanding successes. From Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah we gain a very different picture, even if it comes mainly from their disdainful silence about the outward spring-cleaning.

The wise said quite truly:

"The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside!

I shall be slain in the streets'" (Prov. 22 : 13).

The desires of the heart repeatedly find external justification why they should be carried out. Haggai was entirely correct, when he turned the searchlight of the Spirit on his contemporaries' motivations. But the Chronicler was equally correct, when he stressed the external influences that seemed to excuse the carrying out of the secret fears and motives of those who had returned. So the unfinished Temple remained as a mute rebuke to God's people for nineteen years.