

“If you do not follow carefully all the words of this law the Lord will scatter you among the nations, from one end of the earth to the other “ Deut 28:64

“ I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you” Ez 20:35

Prophecy Fulfilled

The history of the Jews has been remarkable for a number of features, and none more so than its dispersion or exile amongst other nations for over two and half millennia. The fact that prophetic warnings of such an exile were given at the very inception of the nation make that exile more remarkable still. Deuteronomy relates that God entered into a covenant with the Israelites just before they entered their “promised land”. He covenanted to bless the nation and its land, but the condition was obedience to his laws. Righteousness and godliness were to mark the nation, otherwise it would be oppressed and, even worse, lose its land and be dispersed: *“The Lord will scatter you among the nations, from one end of the earth to the other”*.

Unfortunately the nation’s history from the start was one of constant disobedience, and at Solomon’s death God caused it to break into two halves. The northern half then descended into complete idolatry and was wiped off the map in 722 BC by Assyria, its people seemingly irretrievably lost in exile. The southern kingdom suffered a similar fate in 586 BC with destruction followed by exile in Babylon. But the exiles survived, and in captivity came to acknowledge that it was their disobedience that had brought such chastisement. Since that time there has always been a part of Jewish orthodox thinking which has associated the dispersion or exile with the chastisement of God.

After seventy years in Babylon some Jews came back to Jerusalem, eager for the promised land and determined on restoration. However, they represented only a small fraction of those exiled in Babylon, they occupied only a very limited area around Jerusalem and faced bitter opposition from foreign settlers. Moreover, apart for four brief decades in the 1stC BC, the restored nation was destined to be dominated and oppressed in turn by the great powers of Babylon, Persia, Greece and finally Rome, all of whom for a total of 600 years were to act as God’s continued chastisement on the nation. From the exile onwards the greater part of the nation remained in exile and would remain so right up to our own times, a nation under severe discipline.

It was, however, with the double destruction of Jerusalem and Judea first in AD 70 and then again in 135 AD that the national home once more began to disintegrate and a much greater Jewish exile began. Jewish Rabbis see AD 70 as the start of the great exile. The Rabbinical schools and the office of Patriarch kept up a presence in Galilee for some time but eventually disappeared. The national life in Israel went into increasing decline until virtually nothing was left for nearly 1800 years. During the course of those two millennia the Jewish dispersion spread throughout the whole world. Though acknowledging this as divine displeasure the Rabbis, of course, never associated this with any rejection of Jesus whose claims they continued to oppose .

The Sufferings of the Dispersion

Deuteronomy graphically describes the distressing nature of that scattering:-

“Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, “If only it were evening!” and in the evening, “If only it were morning!”—because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see.” Deut 28:65-68

These words underline the dimension of suffering which is an integral part of the dispersion. The Jews were not simply going to find themselves living quietly in different countries; their experience of being in exile would be full of fear, terror, anxiety and despair. They were going to meet an antagonism that would always be present and bring extreme distress. In the event they would be afflicted by what we today have come to describe as anti-Semitism. That word describes an historic hatred of the Jews simply because they are Jews, a hatred which has a great variety of causes, racial, religious, economic, social and political. Its sheer virulence and persistence throughout the centuries, no matter where the Jews were dispersed, has always been baffling unless the divine pronouncement of chastisement is taken into account.

It would take untold volumes to catalogue the appalling accuracy of this warning statement as it was fulfilled in the lives of Jews who lived in exile over those last two and a half millennia. Only snap shots of the forces oppressing the Jews are possible.

Up to the 1stC AD

This anti-Semitism was apparent well before the Christian era began. For example, the Egyptians, amongst whom great numbers of Jews were dispersed, found the separatism of Jewish religious culture offensive and were unusually hostile to the Jews living in their midst. Manetho, an Egyptian priest (3rdC BC) incensed at the negative depiction of Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, even rewrote the account, making Egypt expel the Jews for leprosy . This degrading libel, like the very many other religious libels that followed in succeeding centuries, never died out. Karl Marx even used it.

In the later stages of the Greek empire (2ndC BC) Antiochus Ephiphanes forcibly sought to destroy Judaism because it was an implacable barrier to his intense desire to spread Greek culture. This led to oppression, war and many deaths. The Greeks were the first to utter the great accusation that the Jews engaged in “ritual murder”, another libel still heard in the 20thC. The Romans made the Jewish religion legal and gave them privileges. None the less their foremost historian, Tacitus, accused them of “an implacable hatred for the rest of mankind”, and throughout the first century the Jews found themselves under constant attack from Romans of all ranks. Their religious separatism and proud independent spirit caused them to be seen as particularly dangerous politically. It was Rome which finally destroyed Jerusalem and expelled the Jews, at the same time killing hundreds of thousands of the Jews in North Africa.

From the 2ndC to the 20thC AD

It is a huge tragedy that, the Christian church, as it gained political power after the conversion of the Roman emperor, Constantine (312AD), rapidly built up through its theologians, its councils and its popes an oppressive body of dehumanising regulations against what it perceived as its greatest enemy, the Jews. In 315 AD under penalty of being buried alive they were forbidden to proselytise Christians, or, later, even heathens. In 339 AD marriage between Jews and Christians was forbidden on pain of death. Next, Jews were forbidden to buy, sell or own slaves on pain of having all their goods confiscated. Since the entire economic life of the time was founded on slave labour this meant Jews were precluded from the major employments of agriculture, shipbuilding and many other trades and faced ruin. In the 5thC the building of new synagogues was forbidden, and mob violence against existing synagogues was frequently overlooked. Jewish soldiers were dismissed from the Roman army without benefit or compensation, and Jews were barred from gaining redress in the law courts and from holding office in municipal administration. Thus Jews were reduced to the status of a merely “tolerated group” outside the society of other Roman citizens.

All this was accompanied by virulent preaching from some church “Fathers” who worked up a violent response among ordinary Christians. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, a notorious attacker of Jews, insulted the synagogue with such words, as “Let anyone call it a brothel, home of vice, citadel of Satan, abyss of all corruption - what ever he may say, it will be less that it deserved”. Ambrose, Jerome and even Augustine, who was the most formative of the church Fathers, all used inflammatory language. Here, then, in the 4thC and 5thC aggressive rules and attitudes against Jews were engraved in the church culture and were to become the cause of so much of the distress experienced over many centuries by the European dispersion. The Reformation and Luther did not relieve but rather strengthened them.

It was this underlying and growing sense of hatred for the Jews that turned a call for Jerusalem to be freed from the Muslims in the 11thC (the Crusades) into a blood bath for Jews across France and Germany. Seeing Jews as a enemy of the cross just as much as the Muslims, fanatical friars worked on ignorant peasants and soldiery to butcher Jews systematically in the towns all along the routes to the Holy Land. This same “crusading” spirit was responsible for the expulsion of the Jews from Germany in the 11thC and 12thC, from England in the 13thC and France in the 14thC. Such expulsions were accompanied with massacres (as in Norwich and York), loss of property and appalling privations. In Catholic Spain and Portugal of the 15thC a particularly virulent anti-Judaistic thrust brought the expulsion of tens of thousands of Jews from an area where they had lived since 500 BC.

Many took refuge providentially in Poland and Russia, but were none the less caught up in the violent 17thC Cossack attacks under Chmielnicki’s leadership against oppressive landlords for whom the Jews were agents. Town after town right across Poland saw massacre after massacre of Jews. An eyewitness recorded, “they stripped the skin off one man ... others were buried alive they stabbed infants in the arms of their mothers heaps of Jewish children were thrown into the water to improve fords.....”. The number of murdered Jews is estimated at 300,000 to 500,000, and some 700 Jewish communities vanished totally. Life thereafter remained one of abject poverty in the East.

Nothing, perhaps, typifies the social stigma under which Jews lived during these centuries more than the “ghetto”. These were walled areas of cities in which the Jews were forced to live apart from other citizens. There were penalties (e.g. whipping through the streets) if Jews were found elsewhere at night. The poverty, squalor, ill health and physically deforming effect of the Ghettos were notorious. Though in most areas the ghetto practice was abolished by 1870, in Russia the Jews continued to live in great poverty in the massive “ghetto” of the Western borderlands designated the “Pale of Settlement”, which became “killing fields” for Jews in both World Wars.

Despite all that could be written about Jewish suffering over the centuries, however, the worst episode of that history undoubtedly belongs to the 20thC. There is nothing at all comparable to the event of the Holocaust either in its size or in its unimaginable cruelty and cynicism. Here every root of anti-Semitism is to be found, every imaginable fear and terror is felt, every kind of distress and dehumanisation is endured, with genocide perpetrated on an industrial scale leaving 6 million dead. To the Jews it seemed beyond God, beyond chastisement; the stench was one of unmitigated evil. It was the most sobering moment ever in considering the judgement of God.

The Dispersion in Muslim lands (7thC. AD onwards)

“Christian” Europe is often compared unfavourably to the Muslim world in its treatment of the exiled Jews, the latter being seen as more tolerant. This was not altogether true. An oppressive religious apparatus very similar to the Christian version operated in the Muslim world; uncertainty, fear, death were always present. In the modern world Islamism provides a particularly virulent strain of hatred. It would not be out of place to say that it threatens to force even the State of Israel into a fortress/ghetto situation. But the fact is that anti-Semitism is not peculiar to any one creed or nation: it is to be found everywhere, not least in atheistic cultures. There was no escape from chastisement for Jews, wherever they were in the world, a fact which continues still, despite the formation of the state of Israel.

Grace and Mercy in the midst of Chastisement.

There were, however, in all this chastisement seasons of grace. These are hinted at in words that Jeremiah wrote to the first exiles in Babylon: *“Increase in number there. Seek the peace and the prosperity of the city to which I have carried into exile, because if it prospers you will prosper ... I have plans to prosper you”* (Jer. 29: 4-7). Jeremiah spoke of “prosperity” in exile, and the exile has in fact always been punctuated by amazing prosperity, as for example in Babylon and Spain for long periods in the first millennium AD. The present U.S.A. dispersion (the “modern Babylon”) could be seen as a current example, a period of prosperity that has lasted for a century. A plethora of gifted Jewish intellectual, cultural, business, financial and political leaders has also emerged over the whole time span of the dispersion, with Jews achieving the highest positions in nation after nation. This has been a most remarkable feature - a divine feature, a sign of mercy on the nation, and yet, even this tragically tended to bring about an anti-Semitism rooted in bitter envy and making the most brilliant achievements all the more dangerous.