

“... when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them ... I am the Lord” Lev.26:44

“This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night ... - the Lord Almighty is his name: “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight, “declares the Lord, “will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.” Jer. 31:35-36

In the verses quoted above, God made it plain to the Israelites that no matter how severely he punished them for their sins, he would not completely destroy them. The reason for this was clear; if he did so he would be breaking his covenant with them which he made through Abraham. In that covenant he said he would be their God for ever, so implying a nation that would never die out. Jeremiah, prophetically endorsing the covenant, said the nation would last as long as creation.

This is a very clear and bold statement made to a specific nation in history, and in making it God tied his credibility to the historical process. What happened to the Jewish nation would either vindicate God or expose him. Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that he gave a particular promise by which the world, if it is observant, might come to recognize through its fulfilment that he is indeed God and the Lord of history. He invites us to cast our eyes over history, read its testimony and recognize the divine hand. He invites us to recognize the continuance of his covenant with Israel.

A Very Vulnerable Nation

A sceptic might be tempted to remark that there are numerous nations which have lasted for more than two millennia, and that there is, therefore, nothing remarkable about the Jewish experience. What about the Egyptians, for example? On the other hand there are many peoples and nations which have disappeared through being destroyed or assimilated. Survival has never been a certainty, and this has been particularly the case where the Jews are concerned for there were two factors which made the Jewish nation extremely vulnerable and a prime candidate for disappearance. **First**, unlike Egypt or Persia, it was a small nation, a despised people. It was formed from a petty tribal group, spent four centuries in bondage in Egypt, and eventually inherited a relatively small piece of land bridging two continents and over which great empires fought. Thus it was not only very small but very exposed and vulnerable. Its moments of glory and empire under David, Solomon and Uzziah were very brief indeed and happened only when the great empires were dormant. It was not destined to be a great ruling political force in the world, but was at the mercy of the world. It was a nation that in fact lost its land to the rule of successive world empires two thousand five hundred years ago and has only recently recovered part of it. **Second**, for that same span of time it has been a nation of which the large majority of its people has lived dispersed in other lands. The story of exile has been one of constant oppression, harassment, violence, dislocation and, more lately, of genocide. The exile has been a place of great vulnerability where the Jews have struggled to survive, and frequently longed to assimilate with their hosts. Thus there have been two great threats to the existence of the nation; being small it was always open to destruction, and being in exile it was always open to being swallowed up in the melting pot of assimilation. But the Jews remain. Seen against this background, the covenant promise takes on a much more convincing note, and even, at times, an awesome note.

Survival from Destruction

Some specific instances from Jewish history might help to illustrate more precisely the danger of destruction that threatened this small nation. As far back as two and a half millennia ago the Babylonians threatened the Jews with extinction. In 586 BC they left Jerusalem in ruins, with its temple destroyed, and what remained of its people, all but a few poor, removed to exile in Babylon for slave labour. There was absolutely no certainty of return – the exile was not a temporary expedient! Indeed Judah’s sister nation, Israel, had been destroyed and exiled in 722 by the Assyrians and there had been no return of its people to their land in northern Palestine. They disappeared. It was certainly no forgone conclusion that the Persians, when they in their turn conquered Babylon, would allow the rebellious Jews to go back to a piece of land that was a strategic gateway to Egypt. But in fact that is exactly what they did allow. Cyrus, the Persian king, made an edict and the Jews from Judah were encouraged and helped home. The point is that while we might accept the historical twist here as seemingly natural, it wasn’t at all quite as natural as it seems. The prophet Isaiah saw the real point clearly; Cyrus was God’s anointed agent in history for the sake of the Jews to get them home (Is. 45:1-4). To spiritual eyes there was much more here than a natural process; there was an act of God.

A major threat of genocide against the whole nation scattered throughout the Persian empire came when the king’s favourite, angered by the Jewish leader, Mordecai, made a careful plan for their complete annihilation (Book of Esther). The providential position of a Jewess as queen brought deliverance from a plan that might well have been carried out.

The most destructive episode for the nation took place in Roman times, six hundred years later. In AD 70 Jerusalem and its temple were once more laid waste with massive loss of life, and in AD 135 a further act of Jewish rebellion led to the complete razing of the city, the erection of pagan altars and the prohibition of Jews from living there. In addition large areas of land around Jerusalem and in Galilee were again laid waste, again with enormous loss of life. The nation lost its major institutions of kingship, priesthood and temple, and for a time even the teaching of Torah was forbidden. The Romans were explicitly intent on destroying the national roots. These two catastrophes formed a hammer blow from which the Jewish nation in the homeland never recovered.

It seemed it “*ceased to be a nation before him*”. For any other nation it might well have been the end, but in the providence of God there remained one thing that would ensure the continuance of the people; that was the “Dispersion” (the “Diaspora”) or, more accurately the exile (the “*gulat*”).

When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem the Dispersion had already been in existence for 500 years. It was particularly strong in Babylon, but it was found all over the Roman Empire (Acts 2:1). Most Jews lived in the Dispersion. It is extraordinary that the very thing that in large measure formed the judgement of God on the nation, the “*gulat*”, now became the salvation of the nation. God turned his very judgement of exile into an ark that would preserve his people for two thousand years. Over those two thousand years there were many instances of attempted destruction of the Jews, but it is very difficult indeed to destroy a nation that is dispersed among many other nations. The exile stands as a divine master stroke, combining judgement and preservation. Thus, though Spanish Christians in the Dark Ages sought their destruction, though the Crusaders killed Jews wherever they found them across Europe, and though, later, Spain, England and France etc all expelled their Jewish populations, such destructive events never reached all Jews. In extremis, Jews sought refuge in other lands, which, at critical moments always seemed providentially to open up for them. In more recent history, the 19C and 20C Russian and Polish pogroms could not reach all Jews, and, more particularly, even the Nazi programme of total genocide, much the greatest attempt to destroy the Jewish people of all time, though appalling in its destruction (2/3rds of European Jewry were killed) could not reach the whole “nation”. A new providential door in N. America let in 4 million Jews. None the less, had the German armies succeeded in their Russian and Middle Eastern campaigns the outcome for the Jewish nation in the 20C might well have been different, for all European and Middle Eastern Jewry would have been at their mercy. But that was not something of which the God of history and the God of the covenant was unaware. The German armies were destroyed.

Deliverance from Assimilation - “Torah”, The Positive Factor

Whilst the “*gulat*” proved to be in one sense the salvation of the nation, it none the less held great danger for the Jews as a distinct people. It could have been in fact the very place where they lost completely their identity, for the pressure to assimilate and become one with their surroundings was always present and powerful. The danger was made worse by the extraordinary reluctance of the Jews throughout the centuries to leave their place of exile and return to their land. Restoration was certainly always in their prayers and thinking, but the personal cost of doing so and the opportunity seemed always prohibitive.

Two factors have been crucial in preventing the sort of assimilation that over two millennia ought on any reckoning to have taken place. The **first** of these was the adoption of the Torah (5 books of Moses), with its associated literature, as the basis of Jewish law and society. This produced a clear national identity throughout the dispersion. The **second** was the fact that the nations amongst whom the Jews were dispersed did not allow the Jews as a whole to assimilate, even when they sought to do so. Both of these factors bear the mark of a divine providence for keeping God’s covenant nation alive and distinct.

The centrality of the Torah in the nation was paradoxically the fruit of the two devastating experiences suffered first at the hands of the Babylonians and then the Romans. The destruction of the first temple and the exile to Babylon forced the Jews to concentrate on their Torah literature and brought about the widespread local study of it in synagogue meetings. The synagogue, which was to have a vast influence throughout the dispersion for two and half millennia, was born in the first exile. Though the temple was rebuilt after the return from Babylon, the synagogue remained, along with those who taught from the Torah. It was not long before the “Law and the Prophets” were committed to writing, and the accompanying “oral law” (explanations and comments of the Torah) carefully remembered. When the Romans, after the death of Jesus, in their turn destroyed temple and kingdom an even more powerful development of the “book and synagogue” culture followed. In the five centuries that followed the Roman destructions, the oral law was committed to writing (The Mishnah), and the comments on the oral law were also written down (Talmud). Schools and colleges appeared and Rabbis became the national leaders. The behaviour, the beliefs and the identity of the Jews became very clear. This set them as a “people apart” in the exile. Whilst, therefore, it was their attitude to the Law that blinded the Jews to their Messiah in the first century AD, it was the Law, and the huge amount of study they invested in it that, in the mercy and providence of God, preserved their identity across the dispersion for centuries.

Deliverance from Assimilation - The effect of anti-Semitism

To be a minority people with a clearly different culture and behaviour is naturally to invite suspicion, misunderstanding and antagonism. That happened wherever the Jews went in the dispersion, except when they proved useful to the people or rulers around them. The Jews faced a greater danger, however, than mere ostracism. From the 4th Century AD they lived in Christian lands and from the 7thC they found themselves living in Moslem lands. Neither religion was friendly to them, and oppressed them, particularly so the Christian states, where over the centuries they became very much a “pariah” people. The pain and oppression of this in itself brought pressure to the Jew to assimilate, or at least conform outwardly, but such a course never proved to be viable option. Grotesque slander and misrepresentation, refusal of status and normal employment, all fuelled by religious hatred proved an impassable barrier and they were never allowed to make the leap. Until the 18thC anti Judaism kept them separate, and in the 19thC and 20thC, when liberalism for a time held out high hopes of assimilation for Jews, a more virulent anti-Semitism burst on the scene which violently identified them racially and ultimately lead to the Holocaust, making them realise they were for ever the outcast. Both anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism were, of course, expressions of insensate evil, but in the overriding providence of God they were also instrumental in preserving the identity of the nation. Indeed the 20thC Holocaust was a major cause of the new State of Israel. It is precisely in such convoluted historical processes that we perceive the hand of God: what was intended for evil was made to work for good. The nation remained.

God was fully in the historical process of the centuries, and the Jewish nation was preserved. Has it been preserved for no purpose? Is the covenant to no purpose? That simply is not credible. Every instinct demands a purpose, and both the covenant and the prophetic word demand an outcome involving national restoration with blessing for the world.