

CHAPTER XXII

The Return of the Exiles

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The history of the Return introduces us to a new people, the Hebrew nation has changed into the Jewish Church. We hear no more of idolatry, that phase of the national childhood being over, so we may call it the end of the first period of life. Broadly speaking there are three great periods to individual and national life. The first, the development of the national life, is in the individual the development of the physical life; the childhood period. In the second period we find the growth of the mental life, the systematizing of knowledge, the learning of co-operation, organization, and the turning to highest ideals; the manhood period. The third is the spiritual life, in biblical pages the Christian era, the reign of spiritual man.

We enter now on the second period of Jewish history, dealing with a new people, the Jews, broadened by contact with other nations, a chastened and disciplined people. As in our childhood period physical prowess is the great goal to be striven for, in the nation it is national power. But growing side by side with the physical man was the mental man, to bring the physical into subjection, and the restraining power of the national life were the prophets. These have now such ascendancy in the new life that around their written words a church and national organization grows. As the dethronement of the national life came with the captivity so the physical man is dethroned when the mental man takes possession by subordinating the body to mental discipline. In the third period, the Real, the spirit, comes into dominion, and both the body and the intellect are reduced to servitude, which however is joyous, spontaneous service.

These people are not going out under great warriors to conquer, they are reconstructionists with the zeal of hardy pioneers, animated with the intense love for the traditions and historic places of their race. The waste places are to be rebuilt as foretold by their prophets, and their literature and religious ceremonies will be systematized, and the nation reorganized. They do not work under taskmasters, but voluntarily yield themselves to scribes, teachers and rulers. Well seasoned and disciplined lives confront us now, marching forward with definite purpose and constructive ideals to retain all that is their inheritance to rebuild on the old national sites, and await there the fulfillment of their prophecies.

The great National and Prophetic literature is changed to Ecclesiastical Histories and ceremonies. The national history is re-written by the churchmen and called Chronicles. Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra and Nehemiah are the names which stand out most conspicuously at this period; different men from the preceding period because

the times are different. Men make the times, and in turn the times make the men. Great men answer the call of the needs of their own periods, supply it and therefore become the mirror in which we see the consecutive steps of history.

Great spiritual ideals come from youth rather than manhood, so we find that the great prophets belong to the past rather than the mid-period. This period is interesting for its discipline, accuracy and active work rather than for any new ideals or dynamic climaxes. These belong to the third, the spiritual period, in which all the ideals of youth culminate. "The first shall be last" and so in mid-time, we eliminate, separating the wheat from the chaff, and establish in consciousness the true, and "wait" for the promised Messiah, the Real of us to descend upon us and take possession of its own.

Fifty years after the fall of Jerusalem, 538 B.C., in the first year of his reign over conquered Babylon, Cyrus permitted all of the Jews who wished to do so to return to Jerusalem. He also gave them the vessels which had been taken from their temple. Many Jews had grown rich in Babylon and held influential positions who did not wish to return and face the hardships and privations of what would be pioneer work; but they contributed liberally to their returning countrymen under the leadership of a descendant of the former reigning house of Judah, Zerubbabel.

The company came to Jerusalem and immediately began work on the temple, by laying the foundation of it. Work on it was stopped by the jealousy and interference of the Samaritans, a mixed race of portions of the lost ten tribes who had intermarried with the heathen nations about. These people still called themselves followers of Moses, but were largely idolatrous. The foundation lay for sixteen years, and in 520 B.C. the zeal of the city and temple builders received an impetus from two complementary yet wholly different characters, Haggai and Zechariah. These men set themselves to the task of rebuilding the temple; Haggai, from the practical standpoint of a business leader who stimulates to actual work, is the man of the hour.

Haggai, with that faculty which all practical people have, knows when the opportunity comes to do a thing it should be accepted. Darius had attained the throne of Persia, there was some doubt as to his actual right to it, and he was kept so busy with this affair that the province of Judah is left much to itself. At this opportune time, Haggai, with the old direct method of pre-exilic prophets raised his voice, "Thus speaketh the Lord of Hosts saying: This people say, It is not time for the Lord's house to be built. Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet saying, Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in ceiled houses, while the house of the Lord lieth waste?" And the encouragement of the leader, not the driver is in his words: "Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land and work; for I am with you. The silver is mine and the gold is mine. The latter glory of this house, shall be greater than the former, saith the Lord."

Zechariah, "Whose mystic visions are as untranslated into prose as those of Percival in Tennyson's 'Holy Grail'" (Abbott), a priest who makes his appeal to the imagination of the people, is a splendid combination with the practical layman, Haggai; such complementary characters should always work side by side. The practical man needs the vision of the seer, or he works around in a circle with no expanding models; the seer must have the power to get his vision over into expression, else they fall still-born by the way. This prophet shows in his work the influence of Ezekiel, and of Babylonian art with its mystic imagery.

Zechariah gives us the secret of work, which does not waste but increases our power. Work by his method and we astonish ourselves with accomplishment. In fact, we never do anything except what we do under this rule; everything else will fail, a useless expenditure of force. When we blindly rush ahead in the human way, we do not *make*, we *mar*. "Not by my might, nor by my power, but by my spirit, said the Lord of Hosts." And the easy way to the goal, simple receptivity, he also sees: "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he is waked up out of his holy habitation."

His mystic name for the Messiah is "The Branch." "In that day shall ye call every man his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree." Pre-exilic prophets had seen the great day of the Lord, to be destruction, when the Lord would overthrow wickedness; but Zechariah sees the breakdown of national borders and differences in creeds; in the great day when the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is an established fact, which holds the race in unity and peace. Under this inspiration the Temple was completed.

A singular instance of pre-vision was Jeremiah's. He had predicted the return of the exiles in seventy years, and the Temple was actually built in the seventieth year from the destruction of the old one. If the second temple was not a magnificent royal edifice--and those who remembered the former glory wept at this deficiency--it was surely more acceptable to the democratic Jehovah, built by the voluntary co-operation of prophet, priest, governor and people.

In 458 B.C. rose another great leader, who formed a company of exiles desiring to return to Jerusalem. In this character we have a priest and a scribe, one who was deeply rooted in piety, unwavering in faith, a strong leader and an active worker. Ezra "was a ready scribe in the law of Moses," and the reigning king, Artaxerxes, granted him permission to return with a company he had formed. He collected large sums of money, freewill offerings, with many vessels of gold and silver, and "two vessels of fine brass as precious as gold."

There was a long and dangerous journey before the exiles whom Ezra had gathered, and who met at "the river which runneth to Ahava." "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek of him a straight way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the

enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them that seek him, for good; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him. So we fasted and besought our God for this and he was entreated of us."

It was a naive confession, and Ezra's faith carried them through to Jerusalem to safety. Ezra became a great power here, so great indeed that he induced the Jews who had married foreign women to put away those wives. No one without intense zeal could wield a power like this. Heathen women had been responsible largely for the fall of the old kingdoms, and this precaution was considered necessary to keep the faith pure. Many hardships and wrongs remained to be adjusted and as the demand always creates the supply, we come to another great character, Nehemiah.

Some thirteen or fourteen years had elapsed since the return under Ezra, when the word comes to Nehemiah, the cup-bearer to the king of Persia: "I was in Shushan, the palace, when Hanani, one of my brethren came, he and certain men out of Judah; and I asked him concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach; the wall of Jerusalem is also broken down and the gates thereof are burned with fire. And it came to pass when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days; and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven, that keeps covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments: let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer of thy servant, which I pray at this time, day and night, for the children of Israel, thy servants."

Marvelous and speedy is the answer to direct prayer: "And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, when wine was put before him, that I took up the wine, and gave it to the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence. And the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was sore afraid. And I said unto the king, Let the king live forever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire? Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make thy request? So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favor in thy sight, that thou wouldst send me unto Judah, that I may build it. And the king said unto me (the queen also sitting by him), For how long shall thy journey be? and wilt thou return? and I set him a time."

Nehemiah receives all necessary letters from the king to his foresters for lumber and other needful aids; also a military escort of the king's own soldiers. He comes to Jerusalem and becomes governor of the province. An indefatigable worker is he, going about at night alone and acquainting himself with the conditions of the city; its ruined walls and the debris so great that : "There was no place for the beast that was

under me to pass. And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did. Then said I unto them, Ye see the evil case that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come let us build up the wall of Jerusalem that we be no more a reproach."

Much he has to contend with, but he is a liberal and sagacious governor. He has singleness of purpose and does not ask any one to do what he himself is unwilling to do, or to go where he himself does not lead the way. He works well with Ezra the scribe, and between them the ecclesiastical and political organization is established. The book of Nehemiah carries the history of the Jewish people down to a later date than any of the other historic books of the Old Testament, 443 B.C. We must therefore trace the rest of the history by means of the miscellaneous writings and through the history of other nations with which they came into contact.

The establishment of formal religions brings protests against the abuses which inevitably follow when the original founders with their consecrated zeal have passed away. So we come to the last prophet in the Old Testament, Malachi. This prophet's name is unknown, he receives his name from his title for the Messiah, My Messenger. He is one of the most advanced thinkers in the Old Testament: he recognizes Jehovah as God of the whole earth, and that even the worship of heathen nations, if sincere, will be acceptable to him. His trust in God to make himself clear is absolute, therefore formal religionists need not *misinterpret* him.

He is worthy of being the last prophet, before the advent of the One who fulfilled all prophecy. He exhorts us all to true religion, and to the fulfillment of all of our duties: "Bring ye the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith said the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

And this tribute to the Messiah is a fitting one from the last great figure of the old Dispensation to the One who opens the new Dispensation: "Behold, I send *my messenger*, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple: and the messengers of the covenant, whom ye delight in, behold he cometh, said the Lord of Hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap; and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and they shall offer unto the Lord offerings of righteousness."