

THE INTER-TESTAMENT PERIOD

II. THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT

It is important to remember that only a minority of the Jews, consisting of about 60,000, originally returned from Babylon, first under Zerubbabel and afterwards under Ezra. We should also note that the wealthiest and most influential of the Jews remained in Babylon.

There were great changes which came over the Jews after Malachi goes off the scene. It did not result from the foreign armies destroying their land. The Jews themselves changed. New religious orders or sects formed among the Jews such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. There are also new institutions forming such as the Synagogue, the order of the Scribes, and the Sanhedrin.

The whole nation, both politically and religiously, came to be called Judaism. The nation developed around the Old Testament Scriptures where the people and their religion became inseparably identified. All these changes, the rise of these new sects and institutions and the evolution of Judaism, have come about during those four hundred years between the Old Testament and the New. So, then, as we have reviewed the effect of world politics on the Jews, let us now trace the major internal and religious developments.

Internal Developments

To understand the internal development of the Jews, we must appreciate the profound impact of their 70 year exile in Babylon. In 606 B.C. and again in 587 B.C. Judea was overrun, Jerusalem was reduced to ruins, and the bulk of the people were carried away to Babylonia.

The Jews went into that exile hopelessly involved in idolatry; but they emerged from it as the most monotheistic people in the world, a people who believed in the one true God. The Jewish people emerge from the Babylonian exile as totally and forever converted from idolatry, having

become worshipers of the one true God.

How can we account for this? What so decisively achieved what all previous chastisements, prophetic exhortations and divine warnings failed to do? What so fully and finally converted the Jews from idolatry to the worship of the one true God?

The answer is that it was the miracle of prophecy being fulfilled before their eyes. In the writings of their own prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, there was foretold what would take place. They foretold the destruction of Jerusalem, their exile in Babylon, the sudden defeat of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian, and the edict of Cyrus to restore the temple at Jerusalem. These were all foretold two hundred years in advance including their seventy-year exile in Babylon. It all happened exactly as the prophets foretold! From this, the Jews must have realized that the gods and idols of the nations were false and that Jehovah was the only true God, the Creator of all things, the sovereign Ruler of the universe.

Now let us look at the rise and growth of Judaism as they return to their land in response to the edict of the Emperor Cyrus of Persia.

There is something else we should know. Those who returned to Jerusalem were the most devout of all the Jews. They knew what they believed, and why they believed it. And they knew why they were returning.

So upon their return to their land, what did they find? There was no king and no throne; the royal line of David was gone and there was no temple. And no longer is there any national independence, for, although the fifty thousand have returned with the purpose of re-establishing a Jewish state in Judea, they are there under the authority of Cyrus. The entire area was overgrown with weeds and the structures were in decay.

How could they have returned with such devout eagerness? It was because there is one thing which has become the most precious and vital of their possessions. It was their sacred SCRIPTURES. By fulfilled prophecy, the Scriptures had proved beyond a doubt to be the inspired word of the one true God who was very much their God.

But besides this, the returning Jews now see in their Scriptures, especially in the prophets, the promise of their coming Messiah who would permanently regather and exalt them, and under whose glorious reign all the promised blessings of the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled. They would once again be free from foreign domination.

Law from Past: Hope for Future

Now these two things - this new zeal for the Law and their Messianic hope - lie at the very root of "Judaism," the system of Jewish religion which originated just after the Exile and developed during the inter-Testament period. This new Jewish state, as restored under the Remnant leaders Zerubbabel and Jeshua, belonged to a different order of things. The higher truths of Israel's religion is now being embraced by **all** who returned to Judea instead of just a few.

Synagogue, Scribes, Oral Law

From the return of the remnant on, the local synagogue, in which the Scriptures were read and expounded, and the order of the scribes, who were the specialists in translating and explaining those Scriptures, **assumed an ever-increasing importance.**

Also, from that time on, there began to form that elaborate system of interpretations, amplifications and additional regulations of which resulted in the Judaism of our Lord's time. We know that this system was utterly lacking in spirituality as indicated to us by our Lord. More and more the trend in Judaism became one of **legalistic literalism** and **religious externalism**. A massive commentary, interpretation and supplementation concerning the Scriptures developed

which became known as the Oral Law. This was handed down with such traditional sanctity that by the time of Jesus' birth, obedience had become transferred from the Law **to the traditional interpretation!**

Mishna and Talmud

The Oral Law was called the **MISHNA**, and was accompanied by a legal exegesis which was called the **Halachoth**. It was further supplemented with the **Haggadoth** or moral, practical, and often fanciful interpretations of Scripture. It was handed down orally for generations until it was gradually recorded in its various parts and forms, until finally, about the end of the second century A.D., it was all compiled by a Rabbi named Jehuda into **the TALMUD**. The Talmud is in two main parts: (1) the **Mishna**, or Oral Law, and (2) the **Gemara**, or commentaries upon the Mishna. The Talmud remains the most revered and authoritative encyclopedia of the Jewish faith to this day.

Jesus found the Talmud to be a formidable obstacle. To contradict it as He did (Matt. 15:1-9, 23:16-18, 23), was to go against the whole weight of Jewish scholarly opinion, devout conviction, and public sentiment. Moreover, we can well understand the significance and importance when our Lord said six times, "Ye have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you . . ." He was not putting His "I say unto you" over against the Old Testament Scriptures but against maxims of what had come to be the Oral or traditional law. Jesus referred to the Scriptures themselves by saying, "It is written."

So much, then, for "Judaism." In the end it resulted in such a hard and ceremonial religiosity, generally speaking, that it became the most formidable obstruction to our Lord's ministry of grace. By this religious externalism, formalism, and works righteousness, Judaism perverted the spiritual truths of the Word of God.

The Synagogue

There is not a word about synagogues in the Old Testament, but as soon as we read the Gospels we find them everywhere. In Acts, we find them everywhere in the many Jewish communities throughout the Roman empire.

We should note this. It was from the synagogue and not from the temple that the early Christian Church was organized by the apostles and took its constitution and form of service or meeting.

Our Lord evidently saw His Church on earth assuming this form of structure for He promised that He would be in the midst wherever two or three were gathered in His name (**Mat. 18:17-20**). Furthermore, the offices of the New Testament church of "Elders" (presbuteroi) or (episkopoi), and "Deacons" (diakonoi) was carried over from the synagogue. But the title of priest was never established as an office in church government as were the offices of elder and deacon.

Non-existent before Exile

When, why, and how did the synagogue originate? The facts seem to be as follows:

First, the synagogue did not exist before the Exile. Some say that the word "synagogues" occurs in Psalms 74:8; but the Hebrew word, (mo'adah), according to the latest Hebrew Lexicon means "meeting place or time of meeting". The word refers to the solemn feasts or set seasons in Israel's religious calendar and therefore to the places where these were observed.

After the exile, Israel began to meet regularly and more systematically for the purpose of learning the word of God. The demand became greater because all but the older Jews were losing their knowledge of the Hebrew language, and were speaking in the language of Babylonia. Thus, regular gatherings would begin to take shape, for the reading and interpreting of the Scriptures.

This, basically, is how the synagogue came into being, and it explains why synagogues were so widely spread among the Jews of the dispersion as well as in the new Jewish state which the Remnant set up in Judea.

Basic Idea, Method, Features of the Synagogue

The basic idea of the synagogue was instruction in the Scriptures, not worship, even though an elaborate liturgical service developed later, with public prayers read by appointed persons, and responses made by the congregation. From Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:15, 44; Acts 13: 5, 15; 14:1, 17:10; 18:19 we see that the leader of the congregation might invite any suitable person whom he saw present to address the people. Also anyone attending the meeting could offer to instruct from the Scriptures.

The **jurisdiction** of the synagogue became very extensive as the ecclesiastical and the civil law were one in post-exilic Judaism. The synagogue became and has remained the most characteristic and influential of all Jewish institutions.

The great institution of preaching, one entirely unknown to heathenism, came to the forefront in the synagogue along with zeal for the Law, by which Israel was so strikingly marked from the period of the return from Babylon to the coming of Christ.

Next week, we will look at the development of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians.