

## THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE PERIOD OF THE SECOND TEMPLE

by

Prof. Shmuel Safrai\*

This book is a specimen of the art of making scholarly research available to a large general readership. It gives a comprehensive description of many aspects of the period of the Second Temple. In this article those parts of the book are reviewed which are more particularly relevant to New Testament Studies.

The period treated extends from the Return to Zion to some two hundred years after the destruction of the Second Temple. This is regarded as essentially a single period, because even after the destruction, the Jews still felt themselves a united nation, with political aspirations, and the teaching of the oral law with all its applications to the cultivation of the land continued as before the destruction. It was during the early days of this period that Jewish autonomy, chiefly in the hands of the high priest, was finally re-established and briefly enjoyed. The period also helped the spread of Jewish ideas as a world-wide religion for the first time, a factor which was later of importance to Christianity. An important social difference between the first and second Temple periods is that in the first, those who became proselytes did so because they had come to live in the land of Israel, whereas in the second, not only was there an increase in their numbers but also their motivation had changed in that they were attracted to Jewish religious concepts. This change came about because people were impressed by the way in which Judaism was fighting paganism in all its social and political aspects, both inside Judea and in the diaspora. This, and the exile from the land following the destruction of the Temple, led the Jews back to the universality of the prophets. Probably the fact that both the Romans and the Greeks had 'universal' cultures contributed in no small way to the growth of this factor in Judaism.

The important aspect of the diaspora is then treated. The evidence that Jewish communities in every Mediterranean port had greatly increased in numbers, especially in Egypt, indicates that there were probably more Jews outside Judea than within it. Nevertheless, the hope for redemption, the Messiah and Jewish autonomy was always felt. Conversions to Judaism usually occurred among the neighbouring nations, or among those peoples

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who lived in areas of Jewish settlement: one of the Sibylline oracles even entertains the idea that exile was effected in order to convert the Gentiles (Sib, III: 195). Though conversion often entailed settlement in Jerusalem, many proselytes remained where they were, while others were partially converted in that they avoided pagan worship and accepted some of the Commandments: they were known as “those who fear the Lord” (Contra Ap. 2: 39). It is uncertain how highly organised conversion was, or if delegations were sent out for this purpose, though the New Testament does hint at this (Mt. 23:15):

Safrai then discusses the Messianic ideal as the answer of Judaism to the evils of everyday life, when Jews would return to happiness in Israel. Among the many Messianic aggadot of this period is one indicating that there will be two Messiahs: the son of Joseph, who will fight the last battles, and the son of David. This idea has pervaded Judaism since the earliest times, and even Mattathias, the father of the Maccabees, had been called “the prophet of truth” (I Macc. 14:41). Many of the stories grew out of reactions to historical events, e. g. Pompey’s conquest of the country (cf. the Psalms of Solomon); many people, since the latter days were felt to be imminent, “hastened the end” by raising rebellions (e. g. under Trajan); and even John the Baptist preached the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The synagogue during this period was generally frequented only on the Sabbath – it was after the destruction that weekday attendance became at all common. The synagogue was the centre for meditation, Torah and prayer. It was a popular institution – the priests did not lead the services as in the Temple. Archaeology suggests that there was hardly a village or town without its synagogue, which had now become a social centre for the people, with guest rooms, baths, places for assembly and feasts. Synagogues were known as “people’s houses” – though sometimes they were founded by particular “guilds” or groups. Those in Judea were generally established in the centre of a town, while those in the diaspora were placed outside it – probably to keep them far from pagan influence. Though prayer is mentioned from the earliest times, it is not regarded as a service for God until the second Temple period.

The Temple itself had, by this period, become the pivot of many institutions. There the Torah and Midrash were taught – there was even a Beth Midrash on the Temple Mount. Josephus mentions two sages who taught the young there every day. Johanan b. Zakkai also taught in the shadow of the Temple. Thus the Temple was not confined to sacrificial worship. The scribes too were centred there: 120 of them earned their living in the Temple area by writing, correcting and reading the Bible, which they did according to set texts (sefer ha’ezrah). It was this group which reconciled the Book of Ezekiel with the rest of the canon. They also copied historical documents

and sent them to those in the diaspora who required them. The legal courts, the Sanhedrin, were also situated on the Temple mount. The Sanhedrin itself changed its aspect from generation to generation; in the early days it was priestly, and latterly Pharisaic (though many of the Pharisees were also priests).

The rest of the book describes other social aspects of the Jewish people of this time as well as the development of the canonisation and of the Oral Law; it deals with Hellenisation and the opposition to it in Judea; the Destruction itself; the Jewish sects of the time (Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees); later attempts to regain Jewish independence; Talmudic literature; and the decline of the period.

Description by Mervyn Lewis