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THE JEWISH NATIONAL HOME FROM ABRAHAM TO HADRIAN

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The Curtain Rises

When the drama of history begins, Palestine is peopled by Canaanites, who speak a language closely akin to the dialects of the Phoenicians on the seacoast and of the Amorites of the interior.

As time goes on, a group of nomads move up from the desert. Some of them turn to the east and settle in the old Sumerian regions of Southern Iraq, where they become known as the Chaldeans (of Kaldi.) Others work their way north to the steppe country of ancient Harran, in the Jazirah, while others follow their flocks into Palestine.

The Abraham story binds these tribes together. Terah moved up from Ur of the Chaldees to Harran and then his son, Abraham, migrated to Palestine. The nephew, Lot, settled at the south end of the Dead Sea, until a disturbance of nature drove his family to the hills of Trans-Jordan, where his daughters became the ancestors of Moab and Ammon. A large number of tablets, which were found at Ras Shamra, near Latakiah, confirm the fact that some of the Jewish tribes settled in Palestine at a very early date.

In the course of time the nomads of Syria learned how to use the horse and invaded Egypt, where they ruled the land of the Nile for a century and were known as the Hyksos, or Shepherd Kings.

It was probably during this time that the descendants of Abraham followed Joseph to the North-East corner of Egypt, where according to the Bible story they dwelt for 430 years. This period spanned the Hyksos rule in Egypt, the long XVIII Dynasty, and part of the reign of Ramses II, the Great, in the XIX Dynasty.

The Promised Land

The Bible and the ancient inscriptions give three accounts of the Jewish migration into the Promised Land.

In the first place, there were the early tribes, who moved

in at the time of Abraham and the Ras Shamra tablets. Many historical critics believe that some of these tribes did not follow Joseph into Egypt but, continued to live in Palestine in an uninterrupted way.

In the second place, the Egyptian inscriptions tell us about the Khabiri, or Habiru, who came to Palestine from Trans-Jordan at the end of the XVIII Dynasty. They took advantage of certain weak kings, like Ikhnaton and Tutenkhamon, who were more interested in religious quarrels at home, than they were in their foreign provinces. The name "Habiru" was a Babylonian word for "Bedouin", which the Egyptians borrowed from Iraq and which was probably the origin of the name "Hebrew." Certain historical critics think that some of the events, described in the book of Joshua, actually took place when the Habiru overran Palestine, some time before the true Exodus.

In the third place, we have the Bible story of the Exodus. Moses probably led his group of Israelites out of Egypt during the reign of Ramses the Great or his immediate successor, on whose inscriptions the term "Israel" first appears. Moses wandered about in the desert, until the Egyptian hold on Palestine was weakened and it became possible for his people to go north to Trans-Jordan and then across the Jordan itself into the Holy Land.

At least one thing is very clear. Whether the Jews entered Palestine at the time of Abraham, or fought their way across the Jordan as Habiru, or followed Moses across the desert, they regarded Palestine as their Promised Land.

A National Home is Established

For several hundred years the Jewish tribes lacked unity and organization. Local heroes, or Judges, led them against the raiders, who also wished to settle in Palestine.

By aggressive warfare the Jews gradually gained control over the older inhabitants of the land. The weaker peoples were subjugated and the more obstinate ones were slain.

On the other hand, the Jewish tribes did not become rich or cultured at this time. They had no large cities and even the chiefs rode on donkeys, as they could not afford horses.

While the Judges were leading the Israelites, during the first half of the 12th Century, B.C., the world was shaken by a great movement of populations. The European Greeks invaded Asia at the time of the Trojan Wars. Fleeing before the Greeks, the older peoples of the Aegaeon moved south, travelling along the sea-coast by ship and caravan.

As they migrated they brought disaster to the Hittite communities in North Syria and crippled the Phoenician ports. They tried to enter Egypt, but were badly defeated by Ramses III.

After this defeat, a number of these immigrants settled in five small cities in the Jaffa region. They were evidently called by a name similar to the Greek word "Pelagos" or "Sea." The Greeks called them "Pelesgi" and the Egyptians turned the name into "Peleset". In our English Bible the word is written "Philistine." In due time, therefore, the Promised Land was no longer called the Land of Canaan after its original inhabitants, but rather Palestine, after the immigrants, who came from the Aegaeon.

These Philistines brought with them their superior iron age civilization, their Minotaur like god, gladiatorial contests, human sacrifice, and myths about Hercules, Perseus and Andromeda. When Samuel was a young man they captured the Ark of the Covenant and overran the entire Promised Land.

In order to establish themselves in Palestine and to create a true national home, it thus became necessary for the Jews to undertake a second conquest. Under the leadership of Saul and David this conquest was carried out with heroism and relentless thoroughness. When Jerusalem was made the capital stronghold and central shrine, the tribes were finally united.

Solomon turned the feudal kingdom of his father into an organized state, with twelve administrative districts, a royal court, a standing army, an efficient system of tax collection, a staff of experienced officials, and large revenues from the government copper mines and commercial enterprises.

At last the Promised Land was won. Palestine had become a National Home.

Paradise Lost

When Solomon died, the National Home became split in two. The newly formed principality at Damascus and the states of Trans-Jordan took advantage of this cleavage. For two centuries the Jewish kingdoms were weak and divided, except during the strong reigns of Ahab and Jeroboam II.

In the meantime, a great military power had been gathering force in the north and east. In spite of the warnings of the Prophets, the Jews were over aggressive in their dealings with Assyria. The kings and wealthy people were more interested in political power and commercial success than they were in social justice and their national worship.

In 722 B.C. Sargon sacked Samaria and moved 27,000 wretched refugees over to the Jazirah, Northern Iraq and Persia. In their place he settled tribes loyal to Assyria, who became known as the Samaritans.

Jerusalem would have suffered the same fate at the time of King Hezekiah, if it had not been for the courageous faith of the

Prophet Isaiah and the epidemic, which shattered the army of Sennacherib. But Jerusalem was able to remain at least semi-independent throughout the Assyrian period and only collapsed at the time of the Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar. When that great conqueror demanded the submission of Jerusalem, the foolish young king, Zedekiah, spurned the wise advice of the Prophet Jeremiah and refused to pay tribute.

Thus, nearly a century and a half after the fall of Samaria, Nebuchadnezzar overran the Judean farm lands, destroyed Jerusalem, and led the people of any standing to the Chebar Canal, between Babylon and Nippur.

The Promised Land was deserted, the National Home was destroyed. As Jeremiah lamented,- "The Mountain of Zion is desolate; foxes walk over it."

Yet even in the midst of great sorrow, as exiles in a foreign land, the people did not abandon their hope of a National Home. Ezekiel prophesied:- "A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people and I will be your God."

Isaiah also encouraged his exiled countrymen by his poetic utterances:- "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth glad tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, 'Thy God reigneth!'" "Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem." "The redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away." "For behold I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. For behold I create Jerusalem with rejoicing and her people with joy."

Paradise Regained

In the middle of the 6th Century before Christ, Cyrus the Great organized an empire, which included the Median, Lydian and Babylonian kingdoms. It was natural for him to encourage the Jewish exiles to return from Babylon to Jerusalem, so as to have loyal subjects in the hills, which commanded the route to Egypt. Accordingly, Cyrus gave permission to the Jews to return and helped them to reestablish Jerusalem as a National Home, with Shesh-bazzar of the old royal family as their leader.

This first effort to return to Jerusalem was carried out on a small scale, but during the reign of Darius, the movement became

more important. Zerub-Babel was appointed governor and Joshua high priest, while the prophets Haggai and Zechariah served as the spiritual promoters of the enterprise. Although the new colony was necessarily a weak one, the Temple was restored, the feasts were renewed, and old customs like circumcision and sabbath worship became properly respected.

For three quarters of a century the colony increased in size. Tremendous events were taking place in the world outside. The great Persian Empire was being extended from Thrace to the Punjab; from the Balck Sea to the Nile. After their victories at Marathon and Salamis, the Greeks were laying the foundations of European culture and establishing colonies along the shores of Italy. But the returned exiles were less concerned with these events than they were with strengthening their own city and re-establishing their law.

When Artaxerxes I, Longimanus, succeeded his father, Xerxes, he sent his cupbearer from the palace at Susa, to help the colonists in the National Home. About 444 B.C. Nehemiah arrived at Jerusalem and found that the Jews were suffering from the jealousy of their neighbors. These neighbors were the Samaritans, Philistines, Ammonites, and Arabians. It is interesting that the Bible account definitely uses the word "Arabians" or "Arabs" in speaking about this ancient return to the National Home.

In order to guard against the antagonism of the neighboring tribes, Nehemiah aroused the people, so that they repaired the wall of Jerusalem. They must have worked with great courage, for they took turns bearing arms and hauling materials; sometimes even using one hand to carry a weapon and the other to lift a stone. Evidently the patronage of the Persian King was not active enough to protect the city from local raids, but once the wall was built, the people enjoyed reasonable security.

Half a century later, and a few years after the close of the Peloponnesian War, two Persian princes competed for the throne. When one of them was killed, the ten thousand Greek mercenaries in his army made the heroic escape described in Xenophon's "Anabasis." The other prince became king and was known as Artaxerxes II, Mnemon. It was during his reign that Ezra, the Scribe, joined the aged Nehemiah at Mount Zion.

Ezra soon learned that the Jews were intermarrying so freely with the people around them, that they were likely to lose their national identity. Probably so many of the returned exiles were men, that they were obliged to find wives outside of their own community. What was worse, they had forgotten their sacred law and lost interest in their religion. When we realize that the cults around them encouraged idol worship, sacred prostitution, drunken carnivals and human sacrifice, we can understand why their leaders objected to intercourse with pagan neighbors.

Thus Ezra assembled the people and read the law, so as to develop the National Home. He persuaded the Jews to give up their foreign wives and observe their national traditions with great strictness. The colony at Jerusalem became essentially a religious enterprise, with the High Priest as chief and the priestly code as law. The priests compiled their historical records, so as to emphasize the importance of Jehovah worship, and the old sayings of the prophets were treasured, along with the five books of Moses. Thus the canon of the Old Testament became the most valuable asset of the National Home movement.

After years of bitterness and exile, the prophecies had been fulfilled, the National Home had been re-established in the form of a theocratic state;- the people who had walked in darkness had seen a great light.

The Strife with Hellenism

A century after the reforms of Ezra, Alexander the Great conquered Western Asia. The little Jewish state became part of the vast Macedonian Empire. But before Alexander could organize his new world, he died at Babylon. For over twenty years his empire became the victim of war lords. Perdicas and Antigonas, Demetrius and Ptolemy, used Palestine as a battleground. Finally, in 301 B.C. when some order was made out of the worldwide chaos, Ptolemy Soter held Palestine as one of his dominions.

The Ptolemies dominated Palestine, until the four year old Ptolemy Epiphanes was made king by the edict, inscribed on the famous Rosetta Stone. This was during the period when Hannibal was suffering his final defeat in the West. The Ptolemies settled many Greeks on the coastal plain of Palestine, as well as in Trans-Jordan. At the same time large numbers of Jewish mercenaries were moved to the frontiers of Egypt and Jewish merchants flocked to the rich bazaars of Alexandria.

When the child, Ptolemy Epiphanes, came to the throne, Antiochus III marched down from his capital at Antioch, took Jerusalem and invaded Egypt. He was largely responsible for settling many Jewish traders in Asia Minor. In spite of his defeats in the Aegean, he left Palestine to his successors.

The influence of the Macedonian kings and Greek colonists and the affects of foreign commerce and travel, made a profound impression on the Jews. A strong party developed at Jerusalem, which sought foreign culture and aped the modes of Hellenism. This apparent treachery awakened a reactionary party, which clung to the ancient traditions and was intensely nationalistic. The Pharisees and Zealots were the best known elements in the reactionary group.

The "European" party established a gymnasium at Jerusalem and introduced both the philosophy and the physical exercises of the Greeks. The orthodox party was angered by both and especially objected to the nakedness of the athletes.

When Antiochus IV, Epiphanes, came to the throne at Antioch, he invaded Egypt. In order to make sure that the Jews would remain loyal and not attack his army in the rear, he appointed a High Priest from the Hellenistic Party. This caused the nationalist party to rebel. Antiochus returned from Egypt, re-established the loyal High Priest at Jerusalem, and punished the rebels by confiscating part of their Temple treasure.

Even then the Jewish nationalists refused to submit. In order to subdue them and to oblige them to fit into a plan for the unification of the kingdom, Antiochus Epiphanes sent foreign mercenaries to occupy Jerusalem. A greek altar and an image of Zeus were erected in the Temple court. Swine were sacrificed on the altar and the King's birthday was celebrated as a Dionysiac festival. At the same time the Greek soldiers patrolled the country districts, confiscating holy books and forcing the peasants to eat pigs' meat.

In the little village of Modin some soldiers asked a priest of the Hasmonaeen family, named Mattathias, to make a heathen sacrifice. He replied by starting a rebellion, which was kept alive by his son, Judas Maccabaeus. The books of the "Maccabees" in the Apochrypha described the heroic events of this period. "Daniel" secretly spoke about Antiochus as Nebuchadnezzar and served as a tract to arouse the Jews against Antiochus Epiphanes.

Once again the Jews were obliged to fight, in order to gain their National Home. Judas was killed, but his work was carried on by his brothers, Jonathan and Simon. In the meantime, Antiochus Epiphanes died, leaving his country to suffer from a century of anarchy, with one pretender to the throne fighting against another.

The Jewish rebels took advantage of this state of chaos and won back Jerusalem. In fact they became so powerful that Judas Maccabaeus' nephew was able to re-establish the Jewish kingdom. His sons expanded their domain, so that it became almost as large as it was in Solomon's time. Thus the National Home was revived as an independent state with a ruler, who was both King and High Priest.

The National Home under Herod the Great

The anarchy in Syria became such a menace to the world as a whole, that it could not be permitted to continue. After ending the wars with Mithradates and Tigranes, Pompey led his victorious legions to Antioch and Jerusalem in 64 B.C. After a three month siege, he stormed the walls of Jerusalem, massacred large numbers of the inhabitants, and walked into the Holy of Holies.

A Roman Legate took the place of the Seleucid King at Antioch. Palestine became an autonomous principality, responsible to this Legate. But the Jewish nationalist party refused to submit even to Rome and, one after the other, staged three rebellions.

Finally, in order to establish security, the Romans placed an Idumaeen or Edomite chief in charge of the Jewish state. He was Antipater, the father of Herod the Great.

Then there followed a quarter of a century, in which the Roman state suffered from the quarrels of war lords and gangsters, much as China has suffered during the past twenty-five years.

During this period of conflict, Crassus robbed the Jerusalem Temple of 2,000 talents and appropriated treasures worth four times as much. Caesar strengthened Antipater's control and helped the Jews to repair the walls of Jerusalem, as well as to use Joppa as a port.

After Caesar's murder, Cassius squeezed the Jews for money with which to fight Mark Antony. He also called on the Parthians to help him, so that the Jewish prince was only able to save Jerusalem from a Persian invasion by giving as bribes 1,000 talents and 500 maidens.

Herod succeeded Antipater, his father, and became the autonomous ruler of Palestine. He staked a claim to the throne of the Jews, by marrying their royal princess. Although he hated Cleopatra, he became a strong friend of Antony, who was glad to profit by his efficient help. Before Antony broke with Octavius, Herod was crowned King of Judea and given help, so that he could re-establish the Jewish kingdom in 37 B.C. In the course of the next five years, Herod was also given Samaria, most of the coastal plain, Galilee, and large sections of the Hauran, Laja and Jabal al-Druze.

Although the Jews resented having an Idumaeen from the South as their King, they must have been proud of the prosperity of their revived kingdom. Jerusalem, Samaria, Caesarea, and other cities were made strong and beautiful. Palestine profited by the international security of Augustus' reign and became rich. Herod was so powerful that he became the patron of many neighboring regions. He built the great arcade in the Antioch market place and adorned Beirut and other cities with parks, baths, schools, walls and palaces. He helped the Romans to invade Arabia and encouraged trade throughout the Near East. Best of all he obtained copper concessions in Cyprus and with the revenues rebuilt the Temple on a magnificent scale.

Thus the National Home was once more established as an autonomous state, with a King, who had married a royal Jewish princess, and with a glorified Temple of Jehovah overshadowing the Roman innovations which modernized Jerusalem. Once again it seemed as though the prophecies had been fulfilled. The time could not be far distant when the Messiah would come to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Herod the Great left his kingdom to his three sons, Archelaus, who inherited Judea, was such a bad ruler that the Romans were obliged to depose him. In his place they set a Roman governor, or

Procurator, so that the National Home became a Roman province.

The Jewish nationalists of the Pharisee and Zealot parties were not willing to accept Roman rule without a protest. Fierce rebellions were led by Judas of Gamala and Zakok the Pharisee in the north, when Jesus was gaining maturity. When Pontius Pilate became the Procurator, he became so much hated that after ten years he was recalled to Rome. The fact that Jesus was condemned by the priests but acclaimed by the crowds, shows that even the Jewish nationalists lacked unity. The further fact that the Roman Procurator washed his hands over the crucifixion of an innocent spiritual preacher, indicates how tense the situation was at that time.

Then an event took place, which must have made many people hope that the National Home was once more to become a reality. A grandson of Herod the Great, named after the Roman general Agrippa and brought up in Rome, became the friend of Gaius Caligula. When Caligula became the Emperor, he appointed Herod Agrippa as autonomous prince, first of the Hauran region, and later of Galilee and part of Trans-Jordan too. The Emperor Claudius went a step further and made Herod Agrippa also King of Judea and Samaria. Thus the Jewish kingdom was revived, with the full backing of the emperors themselves.

Unfortunately Herod Agrippa died prematurely. His son, Agrippa II, who was made famous by the trial of Saint Paul, was too young to develop the National Home as an autonomous kingdom. Although he reigned for a long time, he was only entrusted with full control of the kingdom as he matured and was never a true leader of his people.

Although Pilate was withdrawn, equally bad men were made the procurators after his time. Theudas the Miracle Worker started another rebellion. A food shortage took place. The indiscretion of several Roman soldiers caused further riots and a quarrel with the Samaritans created extreme bitterness.

Three new revolts followed. One was started by Eleazor and his Zealots. The second was promoted by a false Messiah from Egypt, and the third was stirred up by the Jews in the seaport of Caesarea.

The Procurator, who tried the Apostle Paul, and the governors who followed him during Nero's reign were so corrupt, that they made things worse. When one of the procurators demanded seventeen talents from the Temple treasury, the mobs started a revolution. The sober minded citizens were powerless to check the rashness of the agitators. Even King Agrippa II could do nothing.

A war was the inevitable result and during the years 66, 67 and 68 A.D. the whole of Palestine was in a state of rebellion. Jews were inevitably massacred in neighboring countries and Jerusalem was occupied by bands of ruffians, who came pouring into the city from Galilee, Idumaea and the other country districts.

The strife was prolonged, because the Roman general, Vespasian, was unexpectedly elected Emperor at a conference at Beirut, the ancient Berytus. Vespasian spent the year 69 A.D. marching on Rome and reorganizing the Empire, after the death of Nero and the overthrow of three pretenders to the throne had left a state of chaos.

In 70 A.D. the Emperor sent his son, Titus, to end the war. After five months more of unbelievable horror, Jerusalem was sacked and almost entirely destroyed. Trophies from the Temple were exhibited in a Roman triumph. Thousands of Jews were slain in the arenas of Caesarea and Beirut. Palestine became an imperial domain, with the capital at Caesarea. The Temple tax was assigned to Jupiter Capitolinus instead of to Jehovah. Hopes of enjoying the National Home were shattered.

Even Titus' victory did not entirely bring to an end the Jewish nationalism and ambition. Although the Sadducees and Zealots ceased to exist, the Pharisee party became stronger than ever. Johanan Ben Zakkai established an academy for studying the Law at Jamnia near Jaffa. The great Jewish communities in Egypt, Cyrene and Cyprus grew larger and richer than ever before. A spirit of exclusiveness developed, and the old yearning for national power lay smouldering.

In 116 A.D., when the Emperor Trajan was employing his legions to fight the Parthians, the Jewish agitators took advantage of the situation and started an extensive uprising. The Jewish communities in Cyrene, Cyprus and Egypt, as well as in Palestine and Mesopotamia, turned against the Gentiles. Appian tells how the Jews slew their victims with excruciating tortures and forced them to fight in the arenas. Not only Romans, but also Greeks and other Gentiles were killed. The histories of the period claim that the Jews massacred 240,000 Gentiles in Cyprus and 220,000 in Cyrene.

With typical Roman vigor, Trajan reorganized his armies and butchered the Jews, as they had slain their neighbors. In the great Jewish community of Alexandria the slaughter was appalling. In Cyprus no Jew was allowed to set foot on the island.

After this terrible chapter of fanaticism and massacre, it seems difficult to believe that one more revolution could occur. But about the year 130 A.D., the Emperor Hadrian did two things which again stirred up the Jews. In the first place, he issued a strict prohibition against forms of bodily mutilation, like castration and circumcision. This law was meant to stop the forms of heathen worship which had become a scandal at places like Hierapolis, but the Jews interpreted it as applying to their own sacred tradition.

In the second place, Hadrian established a military camp on the ruins of Jerusalem.

Simon Bar-Kokheba and a priest named Eleazar organized a band of rebels in the Jordan valley. Their power increased until

they were able to rule over most of Palestine and to mint their own coins at Jerusalem. They undoubtedly received money and help from the Jewish communities in neighboring countries. Many a nationalist must have hoped that Simon was the Messiah and that at last the National Home was to become a reality.

But once again the people were led by over ambitious agitators, instead of by citizens with moderate ideas and common sense. Once again opposition to a great military power brought inevitable destruction.

Hadrian sent an experienced general to put down the revolt. During three years of hard fighting the Roman legions occupied 985 villages, stormed 50 fortresses, and killed 580,000 Jews. Jerusalem became Aelia Capitolina, a Roman garrison town. The land was no longer called Judea, but rather Syria Palaestina. No Jew was permitted to enter Jerusalem under penalty of death, and the farms and villages were occupied by Gentiles.

For eighteen centuries the Jews were as sheep without a shepherd, scattered and persecuted. Nothing was left to them except their sacred Law and an indistinct dream, that in some future age they might be strong enough once more to drive out the Gentiles and to resurrect a National Home in the Promised Land.

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