



## “The Wall Was Built”

WHEN GOD ACTED to create the universe, he determined to manifest love for the “other” rather than power over and possession of the “other.” He therefore inaugurated personal relationships — for example, with “Adam” and “Eve,” “Noah,” Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. In these relationships God acted to make

creative promises: “Be fruitful and multiply . . .” (Genesis 1:28). “Behold, I have given you every plant . . .” (Genesis 1:29). “Go into the ark, you and all your household . . .’ And God blessed Noah and his sons . . .” (Genesis 7:1; 9:1). “Go [out] . . . And I will make of you a great nation . . .” (Genesis 12:1, 2). “Sojourn in this land, and I will . . . bless you . . .” (Genesis 26:3). “Behold, I am with you and will keep you . . .” (Genesis 28:15). “I have seen the affliction of my people . . . and I [will] deliver them . . .” (Exodus 3:7, 8).<sup>1</sup>

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In response to these covenantal promises, God’s earthly partners were to make reciprocal promises — for example: “I [Adam or Eve] will not eat the forbidden fruit.” “I [Noah] will build the ark according to your instructions.” “I [Abraham] will leave Ur of the Chaldees.” “I [Moses] will return to Egypt and help deliver my people from bondage.” “I [each Israelite] will honor my father and mother. I will not kill, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet.”

In this inaugural era God thus promised to the “Jews” covenantal gifts that they, in turn, were to convey to all mankind (male and female). Along with belief in one God, these gifts included human individuality and democracy, human history and relationality, and human freedom and responsibility. These gifts also included human innovation and education as well as human justice and compassion.<sup>2</sup>

The covenantal structure was based on God’s loving actions rather than his self-existent power and might. Likewise, under covenantal terms the reciprocal actions of God’s people also were based on compassion rather than power. This

promissory covenantal structure existed from patriarchal times to the Exodus from Egypt.

## Judicial Theocratic “Wall”

In biblical times a city wall signified autonomy, independence and sovereignty. It divided, separated and excluded those without from those within (cf. Nehemiah 7:1; Hebrews 13:12-14). During the time of the Judges (ca. 1250-1000 BCE) Israel began building a “wall” between God and themselves by adopting a formal theocratic structure. Theocracy is

a form of government in which God . . . is recognized as the king or immediate ruler, and his laws are taken as the statute-book of the kingdom, these laws being usually administered by a priestly order as his ministers and agents . . . esp. applied to the commonwealth of Israel from the exodus to the election of Saul as king.<sup>3</sup>

Because it interposes ministers and agents, theocracy builds a “wall” that represents a departure from God’s personal presence and compassionate actions on behalf of his people. Instead, theocracy assumes God’s personal absence, with his words, laws or powers being delegated to ministers and agents.

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Unlike God’s creative acts of compassion on behalf of mankind, the divine words or laws were regarded as uncreated and inseparable from God’s own self-existent essence or “beingness.” As part of Creation, ordinary creatures were regarded as incapable of receiving, possessing or responding to uncreated realities. Only those who had risen above profane Creation — either to uncreated divinity or to uncreated archetypal “begottenness” — could fulfill the demands implicit in God’s uncreated words or laws. Because lowly creatures were incapable of appreciating or voluntarily complying with uncreated laws, archetypal ministers and agents felt free to impose these laws upon their “subjects.” Theocracy was therefore an assumed hierarchy, beginning with God above and descending through such archetypes as laws, prophets, priests, judges and kings, while the people below remained in subjection. As a result, in the theocracy of Israel the common people were domesticated under an invisible, absent and unapproachable God who mediated his power through a “wall” of laws, rituals and agencies that threatened the integrity of personal existence.

## Monarchical “Wall”

After 200 years of theocratic subjection, the people of Israel demanded release from theocracy. They insisted upon a king who was present and whom they imagined they could choose to obey and to whom they could respond or otherwise appeal. Thus, the monarchical era emerged and persisted through the reigns of Saul, David, Solomon, and the rulers of the divided kingdom. Tragically, during the monarchical era the people were more abused and oppressed by power-hungry kings than they had been in the theocratic era of the Judges. Eventually

they were expelled from their homeland. In 722 BCE the Northern Kingdom was terminated by the Assyrians, and in 586 BCE the Southern Kingdom was exiled by Nebuchadnezzar.

## Priestly Theocratic “Wall”

... [Finally, in] 538 B.C.E. ... King Cyrus I of Persia, who the year before had conquered the Babylonian empire ... issued a decree permitting [the Judaeans exiles to] return to Judaea. Simultaneously the Persian king ordered that the Temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem at government expense, and that the holy vessels, removed in 586 B.C.E. from the Solomonic Temple to Babylonia, now be returned to Jerusalem. ...

As many as 40,000 exiles possibly made use of Cyrus’ offer. ... The status of the new Judaeans community, as well as that of its leader, is not fully clear. Originally it was probably planned to restore to the country the old principle of dual leadership. The House of David was to be in charge of the temporal power and a high priest was to head the Temple. It is thus understandable that the returnees were led by a member of the Davidic dynasty [Zerubabel], and by a grandson [Joshua] of the last high priest of the Solomonic Temple. ...

Although Cyrus’ decree clearly ordered the rebuilding of the Temple, it is not sure whether or not the work was undertaken upon the group’s arrival in Jerusalem. If so, it was soon interrupted, for reasons unknown to us. ...

In the year 520 B.C.E. a climate favorable to the Judaeans developed again in the Persian court and King Darius I renewed Cyrus’ decree to rebuild the Temple. At that time, Zerubabel ... was governor of Judaea.

Encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubabel laid the foundations for the Temple. It took five years for the building to be completed. When it finally was consecrated in 515 B.C.E., many were disappointed, since it was much smaller than, and lacked the splendor of, the Solomonic Temple. ... Nevertheless, the completion of the Temple was of great significance. It manifested that the re-establishment of the autonomous province of the Judaeans was an accomplished fact, and that Judaea was again a “normal” community. ...

One could speculate that had conditions continued to develop favorably, Zerubabel would have ultimately become king of Judaea under Persian sovereignty. It so happened, however, that sometime after the consecration of the Temple Zerubabel disappeared, for reasons and under circumstances unknown to us. ...

In the vacuum thus created, the high priest became the sole source of authority. A theocratic regime, sometimes characterized as Aaronid absolutism, thus established itself. ... The high priest united in his hands both the spiritual and temporal power. Judaea thus became a “temple state” ...

The high hopes which the returnees from Babylonia had for the future of the old-new homeland Judaea did not materialize. The removal of Zerubabel was a great blow to the political strength of the country. The high priest, preoccupied with the Temple, could not care for the strengthening of the country in the manner a secular ruler would have been able to. Thus, Judaea remained for the following 75 years a tiny political entity without significance. The high priests did not care for the proper maintenance of Jerusalem’s walls, and by the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. they lay in ruins.<sup>4</sup>

After this period of struggle, the attempt to rebuild the devastated country was greatly advanced by the two leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah. “Ezra was a priest, a religious leader ... remembered as ‘Ezra the Scribe’ — the

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first Jewish leader to be so titled.”<sup>5</sup> “Nehemiah was a government minister in the service of the Persian emperor.”<sup>6</sup> Together, Ezra and Nehemiah instituted fundamental reforms:

1. Ezra and his fellow scribes assembled and edited Israel’s sacred documents, which became known as the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. The Torah (or Law) consisted of the first five books (Pentateuch) of the Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Ezra declared that these documents constituted the final words of God to his people and were, therefore, the canon. This canonization of the Law necessarily terminated the prophetic office.

From our historical perspective it is easy to answer the question, “Why are there no more prophets?” The acceptance of the Torah as sacred scripture under Ezra the Scribe brought prophecy to a sudden and irreversible end. One people, one religion, cannot have both scripture and prophets. One goes to a prophet for a new message from God. Scriptures claim to be the complete message from God. What would one do if a prophet contradicted the word of the scriptures?

Once the Jews acquired the Torah as scripture, the sage replaced the prophet. The sage was a scholar who knew the Torah and how to interpret it. God now spoke through the sage rather than through the prophet.<sup>7</sup>

2. Ezra’s most important act was introducing to the people of Judah the scroll of the Torah (Teaching) of Moses which he had brought with him from Babylon. Ezra read from this scroll on the New Year’s Day (Rosh Hashanah) after his arrival from Babylon. [As he read from the scroll, Ezra translated the text from Hebrew into Aramaic so that the people could understand it.]<sup>8</sup> . . .

3. [Meanwhile,] Ezra [had] found that the Jews of Judah were not careful in observing the Sabbath. He established strict Sabbath laws, closing down the shops in Jerusalem on the seventh day. Ezra was probably enforcing the Jewish custom of Babylon, where Sabbath observance had become a major feature of Jewish divine service.<sup>9</sup>

4. Ezra also established a strict separate identity for the Jews. He rejected political union with the Samaritans. Ezra also prohibited intermarriage with the surrounding peoples. He even forced all Judean men married to foreigners to divorce their wives.<sup>10</sup>

5. When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, his first task was to rebuild the walls. In order to acquaint himself with the conditions of the wall ruins, he made a dramatic nocturnal journey around the city, after which he began energetically to organize the work of reconstruction. He evidently succeeded in persuading many people to do the work with great speed, always alert to the danger of an imminent attack on the part of neighbors. To further strengthen the defensive capabilities of the city, Nehemiah ordered a part of the people who lived on the land to settle permanently in Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

In those ancient times, city walls had profound significance. Every . . . city was surrounded by a wall, and this fortification symbolized its independence. The greatest catastrophe and disgrace that could befall it was to be deprived of its rights, as a sequel to an unsuccessful war or an internal revolution. In such case the town was humiliated and deposed from its political eminence, its walls were dismantled, and it became a village. Such occurrences . . . [were] called “the destruction of the city,” although . . . the town itself, that is, its houses and

buildings, were not completely destroyed and remained where they had always been.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, when the wall was built, Judah symbolically announced its sovereignty and its full return to a theocratic government under the priesthood. In making these reforms, Ezra and Nehemiah profoundly hoped to win the approval of God himself. They further hoped that these reforms would prevent the people from drifting into future apostasy and idolatry. With respect to the Jews' future avoidance of apparent idolatry, Ezra and Nehemiah were eminently successful.

Because a significant proportion of the Jewish people remained in the Diaspora (dispersed across the known world), Nehemiah then established a central library in Jerusalem to house the scriptural documents — Torah, Prophets and Writings. Not only were all Jews invited to this library in Jerusalem, but scribal librarians made copies of the scriptural documents available to the Diaspora. This was enormously helpful in unifying the Jewish people in their beliefs and practices.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their enormous efforts and fundamental reforms, the final consequence of Ezra's and Nehemiah's efforts were "walls" that excluded the reciprocal covenantal promises of God and his people. These "walls" imposed uncreated, archetypal laws under the assumed prophetic office of Moses, a hereditary Zadokite priesthood, and a theocratically subject people. For nearly another 250 years this Judaic theocracy was maintained under secular rule — first under Persian, then Ptolemaic (Egyptian), and finally Seleucid (Syrian) regimes.

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## Monarchical Theocratic "Wall"

For reasons unknown to us, the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, began interfering in internal Jewish affairs. In 175 BCE Antiochus overthrew the high priest Onias. Onias fled to Egypt and the protection of the Ptolemies. He was to be the last of the Zadokite high priests. Antiochus appointed a certain Jason as high priest, then a certain Menelaus. Meanwhile, Antiochus enforced a Hellenistic reform in Jerusalem. He granted Jerusalem the status of a *polis* [autonomous walled city]. Jerusalem acquired a Greek school for the education of young aristocrats according to the Greek curriculum, and other Greek cultural institutions. A Greek-style acropolis was built for the defense of the city. . . .

The Hellenization of Jerusalem created a sharp social conflict among the Jews. The upper classes welcomed their new status. Priests of the most aristocratic families sent their children for a Greek education instead of an education in the Torah. The common people, especially the pious farmers in the Judean villages, were scandalized and outraged by the Hellenistic reforms. . . .

In 169 BCE Antiochus eliminated the high priesthood, rededicated the Jerusalem Temple to a Greek god, and outlawed the Torah. The Greeks made the Jews worship the Greek idol and eat pork sacrificed in its honor. Anyone who refused was executed. The Greeks killed anyone who circumcised a newborn boy,

and also the child. To obey the law of the Torah was now to disobey the edict of the king.

No one knows why Antiochus tried to Hellenize the Jews. This was contrary to the Greek policy of leaving the native peoples to their own laws and customs. . . .

It is likely that Antiochus began his Hellenization program as a favor to the Jews. A polis had many social and economic advantages not shared by native cities. . . . The citizens of a polis shared in the identity of the rulers — they were Greeks. Antiochus may have outlawed the Torah because he was outraged that his Jewish subjects were rebelling against what he perceived to be an extraordinary benefit — the right to be Greek and have the status of a polis for their capital city.

When Antiochus outlawed the Torah, the dividing line between the pietists and the Hellenizers was sharply drawn. There was war between them, with the Greek garrison of Judah supporting and defending the Hellenizers. The *Hasidim*, the “pietists,” ran off into the hill country and hid from the Greeks. The Greek soldiers stayed in the safety of Jerusalem until the Sabbath. Then they came out and hunted down the Hasidim who, out of religious scruples, would not fight on the Sabbath.

. . . . [Finally, t]he Greeks came to the village of Modin in the western foothills of Judah. The leading Jew there was a priest named Mattathias (Matthew), of the Hasmonean family. Mattathias had five sons, named Johanan, Eleazer, Judah, Jonathan, and Simon. The head of the Greek garrison offered Mattathias a bribe and a noble title if he would set an example by worshiping the idol. Instead, Mattathias drew his sword, slew the Greek, and called out, “All who are loyal to the ways of our ancestors, follow me.” He led his sons and followers out into the wilderness, and became head of the rebellion. The next winter, as he lay dying of old age, Mattathias appointed his middle son, Judah, as successor to lead the rebellion. Judah was chosen over his brothers because of his military brilliance. He was nicknamed Maccabee, “hammer,” and we remember his followers as “the Maccabees.”

The Maccabees succeeded where the Hasidim had failed. This was due in part to Judah’s brilliant conduct of guerrilla warfare. He smashed one Greek army after another, causing losses that Antiochus could not afford. . . .

In 165 BCE King Antiochus sued for peace. He granted the Jews the right to live by their ancestral customs. The Jews, in turn, pledged loyalty to the king. Judah and his followers gained control of the Temple, but the Hellenizers retained the citadel for their protection. The Maccabees went up to the Temple, which they found abandoned and in disarray. They removed the idol, the altar, and everything tainted with pagan sacrifice. They placed the altar stones in an isolated place “until a true prophet should arise” to tell them how to properly dispose of the desecrated stones. After cleansing the Temple they observed an eight-day festival of dedication that they called *Hannukah*, the Jewish name for a dedication ceremony. . . .

Now that they were free to live by the Torah, the Hasidim went back to their homes and farms. Judah Maccabee had greater plans. He wanted to fight on for complete independence for the country of Judah. Now supported only by his personal following of a few hundred soldiers, Judah died in battle not long after the first Hannukah, preceded in death by his brother Eleazar. Greek armies again marched victoriously in Judah, though the Greeks never again outlawed the Torah.

Onias expected to come back and resume his office as high priest, but the Hasmoneans did not allow him to return. Onias eventually built his own Temple in Leontopolis, Egypt, despite the Torah’s prohibition against alternate temples. This temple lasted until the Romans destroyed it after the Great Jewish Revolt of 66-70 CE.

Two different families now clashed as they sought to usurp power and authority from the Zadokites — the Hasmoneans and the Tobiads. . . . Ultimately Simon the Hasmonean, the youngest and only surviving brother, triumphed over all his enemies. He defeated the Tobiads, the Hellenizers in the Jerusalem citadel, and all other enemies. In 142 BCE Simon became the high priest. In 140 he called himself

Nasi — “prince,” a royal title, and he minted coins by permission of the Seleucid emperor. Judah was now a sovereign state, and Simon was the king. Later he or his descendants dropped the pretense of the humble title, Nasi, and used the title of “king.” . . .

[However, w]ith the elimination of the Zadokite high priesthood different leadership groups arose. Each claimed to possess the true interpretation of the Torah and the true understanding of the priestly office. The sects best known to us from ancient writings . . . are the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. There were probably other sects as well. The era of sects [thus] begins with the revolt of the Maccabees.<sup>14</sup>

## Summary

Thus, over a period of more than 1,500 years, the people known as the Jews — children of the nomadic Abraham — moved from the open “world of the journey”<sup>15</sup> to a “walled” existence. They moved from an initial promissory covenantal relationship with the One God to a theocracy visibly governed by a hereditary priesthood, then to a monarchy that eventually collapsed, again to a rigid theocracy after the return from exile, and finally to a monarchical priesthood under the Maccabees, centered in the city of Jerusalem.

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So it was that a sovereign “wall was built” between God and his people and between man and his fellow man (Nehemiah 7:1). The covenantal structure had moved from action to word, from promise to imposition, from private ethic to public manners. It had moved from personal independence to political dominance, from democracy to dictatorship, from relationship to possession, from history to apocalyptic myth, from justice and compassion to injustice and divisiveness.

It was in this setting that sectarian divisions developed within Judaism. These critical developments must be addressed<sup>16</sup> if we are to properly understand and appreciate the climactic event of God’s incarnate manifestation as Jesus Christ.

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## Endnotes

1. Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. See Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); “The ‘World of the Journey,’” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.3).
3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “theocracy.”
4. Moses A. Shulvass, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. 1, *The Antiquity* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982), pp. 59-62.
5. Stephen M. Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

7. Ibid., p. 24.
8. Ibid., p. 21.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Shulvass, *Antiquity*, p. 63.
12. Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, trans. S. Applebaum (New York: Atheneum, 1959), p. 23.
13. See John W. Miller, *The Origins of the Bible: Rethinking Canon History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), pp. 108, 128, 155.
14. Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 51-58.
15. See note 2.
16. See “Builders of the Wall,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1999.5).

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