



Introduction to “The Second Temple: Hellenistic Period”

Review of Previous Article

Cyrus II the Great, the first emperor of the Achaemenid dynasty of Persia (559-530 BCE), not only was the monarch of a vast empire; he also was a devout follower of the Zoroastrian religion and of its prophet, Zarathustra, who had lived 500 years earlier. Cyrus generously granted conquered peoples restoration to their homelands, worship of their traditional gods, and local governance under their ancestral laws. These initiatives led to successive returns of the exiled Hebrews to Judah and to Jerusalem. However, the two principal priesthoods of the Hebrews – Zadokites and Levites – had a long national history of religious separation and geographical division. Thus, the initial returns of the exiles were troubled by a lack of unity and of cohesive support for their leadership and their ancestral laws.

Finally, Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE) probably was the Persian emperor who appointed two Jewish court officials – Nehemiah, the cupbearer, and Ezra, the scribe – to lead subsequent returns of the Hebrews. The success of Ezra and Nehemiah’s efforts depended upon profound changes in the traditional governance, culture and religion of the Hebrews:

1. There was an unexplained termination of the Davidic kingship during the time of Zerubbabel and of his son, Meshullam.
2. There was a prolonged disruption of the prophetic office that had been largely held by Zadokite and Levitical literary prophets.
3. There was a reunion of the Zadokite and Levitical priesthoods, with defined roles for each priesthood in the newly established theocracy. The Zadokites focused on the Temple and its services, while the Levites devoted themselves to Scripture and its teachings.

4. The status of Jerusalem was elevated by the restoration of a wall, signifying its repopulation and its theocratic independence.

5. The people were placed under a rigid covenantal structure requiring obedience to 613 commandments. These not only included numerous rituals, liturgies and purification rites, but they also excluded marriage to foreign wives as well as intercultural involvement with other ethnic and religious groups.

As prominent officials in the Persian government, both Ezra and Nehemiah were very familiar with Zoroastrianism – the official religion of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire. In instituting their Hebraic reforms, Ezra and Nehemiah deferred to the authority of the Persian emperors. Thus, they borrowed a number of Hebraic “ancestral laws” from Zoroastrianism and its founding prophet, Zarathustra. These “borrowed” beliefs included the concepts of an ethereal soul (*menog*), an earthly, embodied (*getik*) state, intermediate and final judgments, an embodied afterlife, and a final bliss or oblivion. The borrowings also involved the adoption of attending archangels and angels. These religious “loans” provided substantial foundations for later world Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even more importantly, they provided much of the framework for the future appearance and fulfillment of the Christ event.

Overview of This Article

For over 200 years (ca. 539-332 BCE) Judaism survived Persian rule and adapted to Persia’s Zoroastrian religion. Then the Achaemenid Persian dynasty was swiftly conquered by Alexander the Great of Macedonia, and for over 150 years (ca. 332-164 BCE) the tiny province of Judea came under the direct suzerainty of Alexander, his Diadochi (Successors), the Ptolemies (Egypt) and the Seleucids (Syria).

Meanwhile, despite numerous internal and external controversies, the politics, culture and religion known as Hellenism had a profound impact on the territories and peoples conquered and occupied by the Macedonian Greeks. Although the Hebrews were permitted to live under their ancestral laws, and although the Zadokite priesthood was given both secular and sacred local governance, there was virtually unremitting pressure to conform to Hellenistic practices. These practices included adoption of the Greek language for speaking as well as writing. They also involved the formation of Greek cities (*poleis*), with their enormous economic potential. Each city (*polis*) was jointly governed by an *ekklesia*, composed of the local priesthood and of selected male civilians who were both educated and wealthy. With this governance came Greek institutions for education such as the *gymnasium* and the *ephebion*. In addition, Greek culture permeated every *polis* with athletic

arenas, theaters, bathhouses and military barracks. However, beneath the explicit cultural practices lay more profound religious convictions:

1. The entire Greek culture was founded on the unity of the secular and the sacred.
2. The Greeks claimed that the supreme god was transcendently unapproachable, immovable and impassible.
3. The Greeks believed that divine ideas, sparks, souls, psyches, spirits dwelt immanently within educated and well-to-do human males.

The underlying conviction of their own present or potential divinity gave power to Hellenists and their influence over subject peoples. In this conviction the Greeks differed from ancient Judaism, which believed that every created person *was* a “soul” rather than *possessed* a “soul.” The Greeks also differed from Persian Zoroastrianism, which contended that every “soul” (*menog*) had become embodied (*getik*) in this life and would remain so in the resurrected life to come. Hellenism believed that every “soul” was immortal and divine. While the “soul” might be denigrated in this life and confined to a body, it would ultimately be liberated from the body through proper Greek *paideia* (instruction) and finally released to return to the ethereal realm and to the original Cosmic Oneness.

While Judaism was generally repelled by Hellenistic culture, it gradually and implicitly adopted aspects of Hellenistic theology. Such Hellenistic theology could only be authoritatively anticipated and confronted by YHWH himself in his human manifestation as Jesus Christ.