

Wickedness in Shinar

In the previous issue of the *eJournal* Tom Gaston¹ examined the tensions that led to the separation of Christianity as a distinct religion from Judaism based on the standard work “The Partings of the Ways” by Dunn.² The catalyst in this development was the destruction of the Second Temple which necessitated the reformation and rebirth of Judaism as Rabbinical Judaism. The article focused attention on the Jamnia community, which after AD 70 was authorized by the Romans to operate with a degree of autonomy unavailable to any other Jewish community and which therefore became the architects of a new Jewish orthodoxy: Rabbinic Judaism. However, the importance (sometimes even the existence) of the Jamnia Council is challenged³ – whatever the contribution of the Council of Jamnia in the land of Israel may have been, it is certain that Roman support was squandered with the Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132–136). The prominent Rabbi Akiva (alternatively Akiba) supported the Messianic pretensions of Simon Bar Kokhba.⁴ The revolt was viciously crushed by the Romans, and the consequences

¹ Tom Gaston, “The Parting of the Ways”, *The Christadelphian eJournal of Biblical Interpretation*, (Vol. 3. No. 4. Oct 2009),1-7

² J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (London: SCM Press, 1991)

³ Jack Lewis remarks; “The concept of the Council of Jamnia is an hypothesis to explain the canonization of the Writings (the third division of the Hebrew Bible) resulting in the closing of the Hebrew canon. ... These ongoing debates suggest the paucity of evidence on which the hypothesis of the Council of Jamnia rests and raise the question whether it has not served its usefulness and should be relegated to the limbo of unestablished hypotheses. It should not be allowed to be considered a consensus established by mere repetition of assertion”. Jack P. Lewis, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. III, (New York, 1992), 634-7

⁴ According to Numbers 24:17: “There shall come a star out of Jacob”(Bar Kokhba means *son of a star* in the Aramaic language).

for Judaism were even more devastating for the population than those of AD 70 as the majority of the Jewish population of Judea was killed, exiled, or sold into slavery after the Bar-Kokhba revolt, and Jewish religious and political authority was suppressed far more brutally, with the Jews even banned from entering Jerusalem.. After the revolt the Jewish religious center shifted away from the land of Israel to the Jewish scholars of **Babylon** under Parthian control, away from the influence of Rome. Rabbinic Judaism became the heirs of Pharisaic Judaism, which gained predominance within the Jewish diaspora between the second to sixth centuries AD, with the codification of the oral law and the development of the **Babylonian Talmud** to control the interpretation of Jewish scripture and to encourage the practice of Judaism in the absence of Temple sacrifice and other practices no longer possible. Henceforth **Babylon** would be the centre of Jewish religious, cultural, and political life; Judea would not become prominent again until the modern era. The destruction of the Second Temple and the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism in Babylon are predicted by the prophet Zechariah and confirmed by Christ.

Zechariah 5 – Vision of the Flying Scroll

The vision in Zechariah 5 is about the destruction of a “house” in the land⁵ and the establishment of a new “house” in the land of Shinar⁶. Zechariah is said to have prophesied in the second year of Darius the Persian (520 BC) but his ministry extended to the fourth year (518 BC). Like Haggai, therefore, he is addressing and

⁵ The curse encompasses the whole land or earth (Zech.5: 3) the Hebrew *erets* is synonymous with the whole land of Israel; here it concerns the land of Judah in particular.

⁶ Shinar: “country of two rivers” the ancient name for the territory later known as Babylonia or Chaldea (Gen 11:2) – where the tower of Babel was built. The building of the tower was an act of hubris “*to make a name*” and a challenge to God.

seeking to encourage the postexilic community. At first glance chap.5 is incongruous with the previous visions concerning restoration, but closer examination demonstrates that this is not so, for the restored community was being reassured that God had removed the iniquity, allowing the remnant a fresh beginning; thus chap.5 complements the earlier visions. However, the vision also carries an implicit warning; for what God had performed in the past – removing iniquity and exiling the nation, would happen again if the nation remained unrepentant. From Zechariah's standpoint (building the new temple) the vision is retrospective and reassuring, but it is at the same time prophetic of future events, for the iniquity that had been removed to Shinar in order to allow the community to flourish, could also at some future point return from Shinar and contaminate the nation again.

The flying scroll with the curse was of huge proportions – it flew so that it could be viewed throughout the land – it was written on both sides so that it could be read from above (by the angels, who act as witnesses²) and from beneath (by the people) – in other words ignorance of the divine will was not an excuse. The Hebrew word translated “curse” (Zech.5: 3) alludes to the covenant sanctions that attend the violation of God's covenant with Israel (cf. Deut 29:12, 14, 20-21). Stealing and swearing falsely (mentioned later in this verse) are sins against mankind and God respectively and are thus violations of the two major parts of the Ten Commandments. These two stipulations (commandments 8 and 3) represent the whole law. The second part of the vision describes three women – two of them with wings bearing a basket containing a third woman called iniquity or “lawlessness.” These “women” come out of the house that has just been destroyed:

“Then lifted I up mine eyes, and looked, and, behold, there came out (i.e. of the house) two women, and the wind was in their wings” (Zech.5: 9)

We are clearly dealing with a parody of the Ark of the Covenant – instead of two “ox-faced” cherubim with the spirit in their eagle wings we have two women (representing Israel and Judah) with the ‘wind’⁷ in their unclean stork wings. Instead of the gold covered mercy seat a lead weight, instead of the glory of God dwelling between the cherubim, a wicked woman called “lawlessness” in the “midst.” Moreover, the description vouchsafed to Zechariah is similar to Ezekiel, “He said moreover, this is their resemblance (Heb., *`ayin* lit. ‘eye’) through all the earth.” (5:6 c.f. Ezek.10: 12; “and their wings, and the wheels, were full of eyes round about”) The two women are based on the matriarchs Rachel and Leah, “which two did build the house of Israel” (Ruth 4: 11), except now a different kind of house was being prepared.⁸

Establishing a House in Shinar

“Then said I to the angel that talked with me, Wither do these bear the ephah? And he said unto me, to build it an house in

⁷ The meaning of the Hebrew word *ruwach* is to be deduced from the context. The main idea running through all the passages is that of invisible force. It is variously translated as either wind or spirit.

⁸ The “two sisters” (based on Rachel and Leah) form the archetype for Ezekiel (Ezek 23: 1-3). Contrast the removal of iniquity in Zechariah with the removal of the glory in Ezekiel: “*Then the glory of the LORD departed from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubims*” (Ezek.10: 18). Rachel and Leah “built the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11).

the land of Shinar: and it shall be established (*kūwn*), and set there upon her own base (*mekūnā*)." (Zech.5: 10)

The scroll that bore the curse had the same dimensions (20x10 cubits) as Solomon's porch (1 Kgs.6:3). This is not accidental, for the porch was supported by two pillars that symbolised the covenant made with David (1 Kgs.7:21);

"But I will settle him in mine house and in my kingdom for ever: and his throne shall be established (*kūwn*) for evermore." (1 Chron.17:11 c.f. 2 Sam. 7: 12)

God had promised (Ex.23: 20), "to bring the people into the place which I have prepared" (*kūwn*). The first pillar was Jachin "He (Jah) will establish (*kūwn*)" the other pillar Bo'az probably means, "He will strengthen"⁹ Zechariah draws our attention to this by using poetic parallelism between established/base.

The Hebrew *mekūnā* (fem.) base (from the root *kūwn*) is used eight times in 1 Kings 7 for the description of the brass base of the lavers and the base of the pillars that Solomon made for the temple. King Ahaz removed the brazen "sea" from its base (*mekūnā*) of twelve oxen (2 Kgs.16:17); one can only presume that he used the base as support for a (portable?) throne for himself which he probably

⁹ De Vries believes that the significance of the pillars may be "*as propriety emblems, claiming the temple for Yahweh*" (S. De Vries, *1 Kings*, 1985, p.112), but they most certainly are concerned with the promise made to David who was the descendant of Boaz. The pillars were decorated with pomegranates – indicating multitudinous seed and lilies, which are also associated with the nation (2 Esdras 5:23-28 and with Passover redemption so Thirtle). The meaning of Boaz is uncertain but most probably means strength- the word "strength" is twice used in Prov.31: 17 (where the virtuous woman is modeled on Ruth) playing on the name of Boaz. The pillars formed an outward symbol of the promise made to David; "Yahweh would establish the seed of Boaz (the *gibbôrê hayil*)"

situated between winged Assyrian (female?) sphinxes.¹⁰ He certainly copied and installed an Assyrian altar in the temple. It was on this altar that the king's sacrifices were offered and to which he "inquired." The prophet Isaiah offered Ahaz an alternative sign, the sign of Messiah, which Ahaz refused:

"If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established."¹¹

We might well add the words of the Deuteronomist;

"Do ye thus requite the LORD, O foolish people and unwise? Is not he thy father that hath bought thee? Hath he not made thee, and established (*kūwn*) thee?" (Deut.32:6)

The divine response to the nation's corruption was to exile the people and the bases to Babylon:

"And the pillars of brass that were in the house of the LORD, and the **bases** (*mekūnā*), and the brazen sea that was in the house of the LORD, did the Chaldees break in pieces, and carried the brass of them to **Babylon**" (2 Kgs.25:13)

"And when it is established (*kūwn*), she shall be set there upon her own base (*mekūnā*)" (Zech.5:11)

¹⁰ Layard thinks the figure of a female sphinx is sometimes met with in the Assyrian sculptures. It seems still undetermined whether the great sphinx of the desert represents a woman or a youth.

¹¹ The Hebrew here is different: "If ye will not believe (*'âman*), surely ye shall not be established (*âman*)." This is the "amen" (often translated as "verily" in the KJV) of the NT

The unclean house destroyed

“I will send out *the curse*,” says the LORD of hosts; “It shall enter the house of the thief And the house of the one who swears falsely by My name. It shall remain in the midst of his house And consume it, with its timber and stones.”
(Zech 5:4 NKJV)

Leviticus 14 proscribes the procedure that the priest must follow in order to cleanse a leprous house. If the house could not be cleansed, the following took place:

“And he shall break down the house, the stones of it, and the timber thereof, and all the mortar of the house: and he shall carry them forth out of the city into an unclean place” (Lev 14:45).

The priest for condemning an unclean house; he would inspect the house three times before pronouncing his final verdict – similarly Jesus inspected the Temple three times during his ministry, culminating in the last inspection during his final week (Mtt.21:12,13; Lk.19:43-48). The verdict pronounced by Christ is based on Zechariah’s vision:

Matthew 23 & 24	Zechariah 5
A den of thieves (21:13). Stealing (23:23-25). Corban (Mark 7:11).	The house of the thief (v.4).
Swearing (23:16-22).	Swearing (v.3).
Your house left desolate (23:28).	Timber and stones of the house consumed (v.4).
Not one stone upon another (24:1-3).	

Consequently “their house” (your house) was destroyed by the Romans, for it was an unclean house, no longer fit to be his Father’s dwelling place. The subsequent history of Israel demonstrates that the remainder of Zechariah’s vision was fulfilled in Babylon, for the Jews, deprived of cultic ritual, established their interpretation of the law as a substitute.

“But in the long run they did succeed in widening and increasing the sphere of influence of the [Babylonian] Talmud, for both the internal dissensions and external opposition only tended to sink more deeply into the hearts of the people its doctrines (Halakhas), legends (Hagadas) and morals. At the end of the first century it was to them a substitute for their destroyed Temple; it was their stronghold, their entertainment by day and by night. It was only when they were occupied with it that they forgot all the calamities past and present; it was the sole bond which kept together the scattered colonies of Israelites, which strengthened them to bear the yoke of the Romans, to hope for brighter days, to be patient unto the end.”¹²

The Jewish sect known as the Karaites rejected “the traditions” which they understood as a perversion of the law, “yet they [the different Karaite sects] all equally hated the Talmud, reviled it, and insulted it, styling the two colleges, at Sura and Pumbeditha, “the two harlots” spoken of in Ezekiel, who (claimed they) referred to these colleges in his prophecy.”¹³

¹² *The Babylonian Talmud*, translated by Michael L. Rodkinson Book 10 (Vols. I and II, 1918): *The History of the Talmud*

¹³ *Ibid*, ch.7 p.30

Conclusion

The vision in Zechariah 5 is about apostate Judaism not apostate Christianity. The temple was destroyed (again) as predicted by Zechariah (and Christ) and false religion was established in Babylon in the form of Rabbinic Judaism. Spiritually the Jews had regressed to the place of their exile. Jesus warned that if the “unclean spirit” was not replaced the final condition of the nation would be seven times worse than the original condition.