



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
150

Box
53

Folder
262

The second thousand years: an outline of Jewish history, 1926.

"THE SECOND THOUSAND YEARS."

An Outline of Jewish History.

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE. SUNDAY MORNING.

NOVEMBER 14, 1926, CLEVELAND.

WRHS

AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

At the conclusion of our lecture last week we parted with Israel in exile, broken, bleeding, yet with an invincible hope of their own restoration. The Judeans in Babylon, unlike their brothers who had been exiled 135 years before them to Assyria, did not assimilate and did not lose their identity in exile for various reasons. In the first place, they enjoyed 135 years additional prophetic teaching and religious training, and during that long period their religious concepts deepened and broadened, so that by the time they came in contact with the Babylonian peoples they were convinced that their religious culture was superior to that of the Babylonians; and a superior culture never submits to an inferior one. A people may be vanquished politically, but as long as it feels that its culture is superior to that of the conquerer, it will retain that culture even in the midst of defeat.

Again, as the result of the deepening and the broadening of their religious concepts, the exiles felt that their God Jehovah was no longer a tribal God and a local God, but that he was a universal God, and that therefore he was with them in Babylon, even as he had been with them in Judea and before that in the wilderness. So that the destruction of the Temple and the collapse of the national life of the people were not an indication of Jehovah's impotence to defend but rather of Jehovah's might

to punish. They furthermore believed that Jehovah was a just God and a good God, and that as soon as the periods of penitence and of chastisement were ended and they had repented them of their sins, that God would restore them to Judea. So that out of their deepened faith there sprang up this hope of restoration, which was soon to be vindicated.

Again, as it frequently happens, in the darkest hours of our people's history there arose great leaders, men of faith and vision, who strengthened the hopes of the people and kept alive in their hearts the thought of their faith, and among these great leaders and prophets who arose in exile was Ezekiel the prophet, and that unknown prophet who goes by the name of the second Isaiah. These people continually brought to Israel, wounded, down-cast, the balm of consolation, the thought that Jehovah was with them, and that before long his compassion and his mercy would manifest themselves in the return of his children to their home.

The opportunity came for this restoration when Babylon fell before the powers of Cyrus of Persia in 539 before the common era. Cyrus the Persian was not unfriendly to the Jews. The Jews had greeted the victories of his armies and had prayed for his triumph over Babylon, Babylon that had broken the power of Judea. So that when Cyrus conquered Babylon he gave the Jews permission to return to Judea, and in 537 or 36, just about fifty years after the destruction of the Temple, a group of exiles under

the leadership of Zerubbabel, who was a descendent of the House of David, and Joshua, the high-priest, set out on the first return to Judea. Not many returned. The prosperous Jews in Babylon remained in Babylon. Prosperous people seldom migrate. But a sufficient number under the leadership of these two people returned to Judea. In Judea they found appalling conditions among the Jews who had remained; for you will recall that not all were exiled; only the leaders and the nobility and the rich class were exiled; the farmers and the laborers and the poor people were permitted to remain by the conqueror in Judea. The returning exiles found these people steeped in poverty and in misery; the ruins had not been rebuilt; they were constantly attacked by the neighboring peoples; their religious life was disorganized; religious observances had been neglected; their morality had even been lowered by contact with the neighboring peoples, and many of them had intermarried and assimilated with the neighboring people.

This first group of returned exiles could not do much, but they did set about to rebuild the Temple, and in 516, just seventy years after the destruction of the Temple, the second Temple was built; hence the Babylonian exile is sometimes spoken of as the seventy years exile. About eighty years later a second group of exiles returned from Judea under the leadership of two immortals,--Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra was a scribe, that is, a man who studied the Torah and interpreted and taught it to his disciples. He was

a man possessed with a great devotion to the law of Israel and to the faith in Jehovah; and he set about reviving the faith. In the first place, he insisted upon breaking all contacts and all alliances with the neighboring peoples, so that Israel, endangered by assimilation, would be preserved. He even went to the extreme of forcing the people to divorce the alien wives whom they had married. His measures were drastic and harsh, but evidently justified by the emergencies of the hour, for Israel was about to sink to oblivion. He reestablished the Torah, the law, as the central authority in Jewish life; he reintroduced the Sabbath and the observances. In other words, he organized a new religious life of the people. Nehemiah was the political genius even as Ezra was the religious genius. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, established security within the land, corrected economic abuses, and as a result of the labors of these two great men, Ezra and Nehemiah, Israel was saved from destruction, and Israel enjoyed a hundred years of peace and quiet. Judea remained tributary to Persia, but it enjoyed autonomy in its internal affairs, in its religious life. The head of the Jewish community was the high-priest, and the internal affairs were administered by a body selected by the Jews themselves.

This period from the return under Zerubbabel to about the middle of the fourth century before the common era is known as the Persian period of Jewish history, because Judea was under the rule of Persia. In 333 Alexander the

Great appears in Asia, and all the empires crumbled before the march of his victorious armies. Alexander the Greek crushes the powerful Persia and becomes master of the whole of the Near East, including Palestine. During his short life Palestine enjoyed no change in political fortunes. Life went on quite the same as it had under the Persian rule; just the change of masters and no more. After his death, you will recall, his empire was divided, and a series of conflicts began among his generals for the possession of his vast empire, and Palestine became a sort of a shuttlecock as between these opposing emperors and opposing armies. By the end of the fourth century Palestine definitely comes under the sway of Egypt, the Ptolemy rulers of Egypt, and remains under Egyptian rule for about one hundred years. This period of a hundred years in Jewish history is a period of quiet growth and development; the numbers increase, the prosperity of the land increases, Jews begin to settle on the outskirts of Palestine, many of them even as far as Alexandria, Egypt, and as far as Antioch. The people become greater in number and increase in wealth. In the year 200 before the common era the Seleucides of the north, that second division of Alexander's broken empire, the Seleucide empire under Antiochus conquers Egypt, and Palestine comes under the rule of the dominion of the Syrian Greeks, of the Seleucid Greek. Under Antiochus the conqueror, and his son, there is no change in the fortune of Israel, but under Antiochus IV, known in our history as Antiochus the

Illustrious, Antiochus Epiphanes, a great change comes over the fortunes of Israel. This Antiochus was very much of the type of the Roman emperor Nero, a man of great egoism and peculiarities of temperament and character; and Antiochus sought to weld his empire solidly together. He was afraid of the great power of Roman imperialism, and so he sought to consolidate his empire thoroughly in spirit, in language and in religion; and so he set about to stamp out the national peculiarities of the peoples over whom he ruled. He had no trouble doing it with all his other subject peoples, but he encountered a tremendous opposition when he came to stamp out the religious and the cultural uniqueness of the Judeans. Heretofore the Jews had enjoyed under the Greeks, and before them under the Romans, absolute religious freedom. Antiochus now sought to uproot the religion of Israel, hoping that thereby he would wash out the Jewish personality and sink it into his unified empire. So he prohibited temple worship; he prohibited the teaching of the religion of Israel to the children; he made it a crime to observe the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays; he used all the despotic and Oriental methods of suppression, with the result that rebellion broke out in Israel. There is one thing which the Jew will not surrender, and that is his faith. In 169 rebellion broke out in the little village of Modin, led by an aged priest, Mattathias, or Maccabaeus, and his five great sons, the greatest of whom was Judas, called the Maccabee. This family, known as the Hasmonean

family, rallied all the loyal and faithful Israelites to its standard, and before long they won victory after victory over the Syrian hosts. In 165 a crushing defeat was administered by the forces of the Israelites to the Syrian armies. Judas reentered Jerusalem, rededicated the Temple and reestablished the independence of Israel. Our festival of Chanukah celebrates that great victory, that great war of independence.

From that day on and for about one hundred years Palestine is ruled by its own prince and its own king. Palestine is an independent country under Simon, one of the five brothers. Palestine becomes politically very powerful, for he had made an alliance with Rome. Under one of the Hasmonean rulers, John Hyrcanus, the country became exceedingly prosperous, but before very long, as is the case with many dynasties, family feuds began to disrupt the integrity of the country, and around the middle of the first century before the common era there broke out a ferocious feud between two brothers, and Pompey, the Roman general, was called in to arbitrate. Pompey declared in favor of one of the two brothers, whom he named no longer king over Israel but only ethnarch,--a sub-ruler, a viceroy, indicating that from now on the power of Rome will be dominant in the affairs of Judah; but with that year, the year 63, when Pompey interfered in the affairs of Judah, the Roman period, the third period--Persia, Greek, Roman--began in Jewish history. It was not very long before the Romans

found it expedient to do away with the Jewish vice-regents altogether, and in the year 6 of the common era--now we have passed into the common era--a Roman governor becomes ruler over the whole of Syria, which now includes Palestine, and from that year 6 until the year 70, when the second Temple was destroyed, with the exception of a short space when an independent king ruled over Israel--Agrippa--the country was under the dominion of a Roman procurator, Roman governor-general. Now these Roman governors were naturally militarists, exploiters, oppressors of the people, and the freedom-loving Jews fretted and grumbled under the yoke of Rome, and great bitterness was in their heart, and they thought of their own Hasmonean dynasty that had been destroyed, and that they were now ruled by foreigners. Some of these procurators were tolerant and the country enjoyed a few years of peace, but some of them were stupid and cruel and irritant, with the result that in the year 66 a great rebellion broke out. The Jews rebelled against Rome. This little country of Judea on a strip of land along the Mediterranean, enclaved in deserts, a little land smaller than Rhode Island, with a population that was infinitesimal in the great Roman Empire, dared to challenge the iron legions of Rome; and the miracle of it is that it took Rome four years to reduce this little country. Rome had to send its greatest general, Vespasian, to break the resistance of these rebels. When Vespasian was proclaimed emperor and called to Rome, his son Nero remained and carried on the

bloody war, which terminated on August the 10th in the year 70 of the common era, in the fall of Jerusalem and in the destruction of the Temple. Josephus says that 1,100,000 Jews perished during this four years of warfare; that 80,000 of them were taken and sold as slaves in various Roman cities, where they were exhibited in arenas and circuses. Eight hundred of the leading Jews of Jerusalem, the nobility, the aristocrats, were taken to Rome to march in the triumphal procession of the victorious Nero, and the arch which was erected in honor of that great victory over Judea is still standing in Rome today. Rome imagined that the Jews had been destroyed, but today many a Jew passes underneath that arch and remembers that it was Rome that was ultimately destroyed, and that Judea remains.

Those who were left--I am trying to sketch hastily the political conditions of the country--those who were left in Palestine after 70 still harbored the hope of the reestablishment of an independent Jewish state, in spite of the terrible catastrophe which had overtaken them, and when in 132, just about sixty years later, the Emperor Hadrian reintroduced oppressive measures in Judea, the people rebelled a second time, and Rome was again compelled to summon its most capable general, Severus, from Great Britain to Judea in order to crush the new rebellion, and again three years of bloodshed and horror before this second and last rebellion, under the leadership of Bar Kochba, the son of the star, was finally crushed. From that day on

the history of the Jews in Palestine is one of a broken and subjected people, politically discriminated against; they could not even enter the city of Jerusalem. Their leaders were now the religious leaders of the prince; their centers were the religious centers of Jamnia of or some other communities; and the center of Jewish life shifts from Palestine to Babylon.

So much for the political fortunes of Israel between the first and the second century. Now a word about the religious development during this period. When the Jews returned from captivity prophecy had practically ceased. You know, prophecy is based on spiritual autonomy, and spiritual autonomy is grounded in freedom. The prophets were free men who knew no restraint, either the restraints of a book or the restraints of tradition or the restraints of political disability. They were free men who uttered the words which came to their hearts and to their lips, unafraid. Now in exile our forefathers began to experience the loss of freedom, the oppression, and when freedom disappeared the spirit of prophecy disappeared with it, and from that period on, say our Rabbis, we no longer had prophesied in Israel, but only the echo of the voice,--not the authentic creative voice itself, the true revelation which was the prophet's, but the echo of the revelation. Now Israel was not religiously sterile after the exile. Some of the great books of our Bible, like the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, the Book of Ecclesiastes, come from the period

after the exile; but, somehow, the stamp of originality, the stamp of original creativity is lacking; that volcanic power, that path-finding religious fervor which is the stamp of glory, of prophecy, is no longer there. But if our people were no longer religiously creative they were religiously recreative. The spirit of prophecy was given but not the spirit of religion. They, in the days after the exile, resolved to live by the light and the leading of the prophets; they determined to organize their life and to guide themselves by those laws which were created out of the spirit and the teaching of the prophets; they determined to remain "a kingdom of priests and a holy people," so that they may be worthy of that great mission of the religious leadership which the prophets had entrusted into their care. And so there arose in Israel scribes who interpreted the law and expounded it and taught it to the people; there arose wise men who probed into the very heart of the law to discover its deepest and profoundest meaning; there arose masters (rabbis) who redefined the law so as to adjust it to the new demands of the advancing life of the people.

In other words, from the destruction to the second destruction and thereafter the book becomes central in Jewish life; the people becomes the people of the book, and all life is regulated and determined by the teachings, not of new revelations which had ceased, but by new interpretations of the book which have now become the central authority in Jewish life.

Now, during the Persian rule very few new laws were evolved. Life was quiet, peaceful, and the religion of the Jew was not in danger. The Jews were influenced by Persian culture, by the civilization of Persia. We find many traces of the religion of Persia in the subsequent religious ideas of Israel. Through Persian influence there came into our religion a whole hierarchy of angels, good spirits and evil spirits. Our forefathers borrowed the entire angelic school from Persia. Many of the laws of clean and unclean, of ritual purity, came to us from the Persians. It is maintained that even the doctrine of the resurrection came to Israel from the Persians. But it was under the Greeks, when the religion of Israel was menaced, that so many new laws, whose object was to preserve the integrity of Israel, were evolved. The Greek civilization was rich and magnificent and beautiful, and easily tantalized people and won them over to it. Now there was much in the Greek civilization that the Jews could have adopted, and did adopt with great profit, and yet there was much in the Greek civilization which the Jews could not adopt without destroying their own conception of life and their own doctrines concerning man and God. The fundamental difference between Hellenism and Hebraism was not, as Matthew Arnold and others have maintained, that Hebraism insisted upon conduct and Hellenism or Greek civilization insisted upon intelligence; that the Jews insisted upon duty and the Greeks laid emphasis upon freedom. The essential

difference between the two civilizations and the two outlooks on life was this: that one was secular and the other was sacred; one grounded its thought in human experience and in human reason, and the other grounded its thought in faith and in God. Aristotle built up a magnificent system of ethics grounded on speculation. The Hebraic system of ethics is grounded in God. Judaism always sought to sanctify life and to sanctify every human relationship; hence its emphasis on the concept of holiness. Life must be holy; human relationships must be holy, regulated as if God were imminent and present. The Jews wished to remain in the midst of the pagan world a holy people.

Now when Hellenism came to Asia Minor it brought with it not only its exalted doctrines of thought and its fine sensitiveness for the esthetic, but it brought with it, unfortunately, also much that was crass; it brought with it much license and immorality; and the Jews who fell under the spell of the Greek influence were attracted not so much by the fine philosophy of the Greeks, or its wonderful art, but they were attracted by its superficialities, its cheapness and tawdriness, its opportunity for license and self-indulgence, and the breakdown of the rigid Hebraic discipline of conduct. The Jews beheld what a menace that Greek civilization was to the integrity of Jewish life, ^{to} the class preservations and Hasidim, the pious ones, who insisted upon separating themselves from the domination of the pagan world; and from that day on there begins to grow up in

Israel law upon law, designed not so much to intensify the religious impulse of the lives of the people as to build up a fence around the people, to save them against the encroachment of this invidious and corrosive alien culture. Now, in the course of time, many of these laws became oppressive; in the course of time, especially after the fall of the second Temple, many of these laws began to pyramid one on top of the other, and became a load upon the people. But at this period, the period prior to the destruction, the law was not a burden but a salvation of Israel. Now, this opposition to foreign culture and this violation of the law did not go unchallenged in Israel. There arose parties and groups who challenged the right of the Rabbis to make so many new laws. There were at least two great oppositional movements at this time. One came from a Jewish sect known as the Sadducees, and the other came from the Judaical Christians, especially from the Paulist Christians. The Sadducees said, "We have but one authority in Jewish life--the Bible. We are bound by its laws; no other laws are valid. If certain new laws are required to meet emergencies, we, the priests, have the right to make them." Their opponents said, "No, no one has a right to make new regulations. It is true that the only law that is binding is the law of the Bible, but the law of the Bible can be interpreted like a constitution, so that almost any new law can be read into it, and the right to interpret the Bible so as to discover new laws is not the prerogative of

the priests alone, but of any learned Jew or any Jewish layman."

So that the first struggle was the struggle for the right of leadership in Jewry as between the priestly hierarchy, whose stronghold was the Temple, and the lay group in Israel, whose stronghold was the synagogue. The second opposition came under the Christians, especially under Paul. -Paul, who was convinced that the world was about to come to an end, and that the new order was to be established miraculously by the intervention of God, said, "Why need all these laws of clean and unclean, these many regulations? Before very long God will appear and wipe out this order of things completely and establish the kingdom of absolute righteousness, in which every man will be perfect and we will have no need of these laws." And so Paul became what is technically known as an antinomist, an opponent of the law. Again, Paul was anxious to make converts throughout the Roman world, and it was easier to make a convert by coming to him and saying, "All you need to do, in order to join me, is to accept a certain formula, to subscribe to a certain doctrine," rather than come to him and say, "In order to join me you must undergo certain ritualistic practices; you must subscribe to certain observances; you must take upon yourself these numerous laws which Israel has evolved." And so as an expediency, in his missionary zeal, Paul and his disciples became opponents of the law, of the written word, of the letter

that "killeth", as he said, and it is this antinomism of Paul and his disciples that forced Judaism to break with Christianity, and that was the beginning of the separation.

I ought to say a word, in closing, about the rise of Christianity, for it is at this time, in the first century, just shortly before the destruction of the Temple, that Christianity arose in Israel. What caused it? What was it? Most people believe that Christianity was a rebellion against Judaism. It was no such thing.

Christianity and its founder, Jesus, taught nothing that was hostile to Judaism or new in Judaism,--no new doctrines, no new ethics, no new revelations, no new prophecies. Jesus said, "I come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it." Jesus said, "Not one jot or tittle of the law shall perish." Christianity was not a rebellion against Judaism. It began as a Jewish Messianic movement. I cannot emphasize that too strongly. It began as a Jewish Messianic movement. The people at that time believed, nearly all of them, that they were on the threshold of the millennium. You know the ancient belief was that the world will exist six thousand years and then be destroyed and remain in chaos a thousand years. Now, the last thousand years, between 5,000 and 6,000, would be the millennium, the thousand years of peace and righteousness, when all wrongs would be rectified and all abuse would be corrected; when all sinners would be punished and the righteous would live in peace and prosperity for a thousand years. That was the millennium.

Now, the chronology of that day led all the peoples to believe that they were on the threshold of the year 5,000, that the kingdom was about to come, and that the kingdom might be established one of the first prerequisites was that a Messiah should appear to restore Israel to its political independence, because here was perhaps the major wrong that had to be rectified; and so this mystic faith was tied up with the political hopes of the people. Now, Jesus was not the only Messiah who arose at that particular period around the year 30 or 40.

Josephus mentions any number of these Messiahs who arose and proclaimed the kingdom is about to come. And their message was, "Prepare ye, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." If ye wish to be spared for the kingdom, cleanse yourself of your sins; otherwise you will go through a terrible period of purgation, of suffering. Prepare ye, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." And that was the message of John the Baptist; that was the message of Jesus, when they appeared,--the kingdom is at hand.

Now, naturally, the Romans looked upon all these Messiahs as political traitors; for the Messianic belief was tied up, as I said, with the political independence of Judea, and so as soon as they caught them they put them to death. And Jesus was not the only Messiah who was crucified in that age of ppeffervid Messianic expectation. Jesus lived and died as quite an orthodox Jew. The ethics which he taught his disciples was the kind of an ethical

code which would help them survive the birththroes of the Messianic age and help them prepare themselves for the kingdom. He had no idea of establishing a new religion or breaking with Judaism at all; nor did his disciples who lived after him. They continued to attend temple worship; they continued to attend the synagogues and worship as their brethren worshipped. The only difference that distinguished them from their fellow Jews was that they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but inasmuch as the Jews did believe in the coming of a Messiah, there was nothing anti-Jewish in such a thing. It was Paul, who was not a Palestinian, who was grounded more in Hellenic philosophy than in Jewish religion and Jewish ideas,--it was Paul, who had imbibed the Gnostic philosophy of the Mediterranean world, who tried, and succeeded, in synchronizing the pagan philosophies of his day, the trinitarian doctrines of his day, with this Jewish Messianic movement that had built itself around the personality of Jesus, and it is to Paul that real orthodox Christianity of our day must trace itself, for it is by combining this Messianic movement of Judea with the pagan religious sentiment of the Mediterranean world that he fashioned orthodox Christianity.

Now from this time on Judaism, having given birth to this new religion, will encounter, as the centuries move on, the times of enemy, the times of persecutor. Israel is now setting out upon its two thousand years of wandering and exile. It is now beginning its tragic and heroic struggle

for its life--scattered, broken. It will meet a whole world arrayed in solid phalanxes of hostility against it; it will have no physical armies with which to protect itself; it will always be out-numbered. But it has already intrenched itself in strong citadels--the law. It has built for itself a bulwark, a code of conduct which will keep it integrated and will preserve it. How Israel met the world, how Israel faced its enemies, how Israel countered the attacks, and how it was miraculously preserved during the Middle Ages, the periods of wandering and crusades and inquisitions and autodafes and wreck and ruin, you shall hear in our forthcoming lecture.

The faith of Israel, now expressed in a daughter faith, sets out to conquer the world, and we shall also see next week how this daughter religion does conquer part of the world. We shall also see how the original faith, which also set out as a missionary religion, suddenly calls a halt to its missionary zeal and becomes ingrown in order to be preserved. Our next lecture will take up the wandering of Israel in exile.

--o--