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By the waters of Babylon, 1931.

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY FEB. 8th, 1931.

The history of the Jews in Babylonia is almost as extensive as the history of the Jews in Palestine and in importance it is second only to Palestine.

Babylonian Jewish history begins with Abraham and continues with some interruptions now and then, to the present day - a period then of almost four thousand years.

Our religion began in Babylonia with Abraham.

Babylonia may therefore be looked upon as the ancestral home of

Israel. To Babylonia our forefathers were exiled when Judea was

destroyed. In Babylonia the Synagogue was created. Out of Babylonia

came Ezra who restored the religion of Israel, Nehemia, who reorganized

the communal life of Israel after the exile. In Babylonia much of the

Torah was written and the more important version of the Talmud was

written and compiled in Babylonia.

In Babylonia too, the first complete Jewish prayer book was compiled. The first Jewish philosophers lived and wrote in Babylonia. The first Hebrew liturgical poets lived in Babylonia.

And in Babylonia, too, the first great Protestant movement, or the

first great heresy if you will, called Karaism began.

So that Babylonian Jewry wrote a tremendous chapter in Jewish history.

By Babylonia, I of course mean the whole of

Mesopotamia, that stretch of country which lies between and around

the two great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris. And in Biblical

times this great stretch of territory was the seat of two important

empires, Assyria (quote Hebrew) in the north, and

Babylonia (Hebrew) the land of the Chaldeans in the

south.

have in mind a sort of a crescent moon or a semi-circle, with the two termini one resting in the Nile Delta in Egypt and the other resting on the Persian Gulf; and on the western segment of this semi-circle you will place first Palestine and then north of it Syria. Then on the eastern segment of that half-circle about the two rivers you will place Assyria, in the north and Babylonia in the south; you will have a fairly good picture of the geography of the Biblical land and you will understand a good deal about the history of these countries.

Syria, by the way, has nothing in common with Assyria, except a certain similarity in names.

- 3 -Connecting the two termini was the great Arab desert. Keep this in mind, this veritable crescent, with the straight line of the desert and you will understand a good deal of what we are going to discuss this morning. At the two termini, the Nile Delta and the Alluvial Plain were the two most ancient civilizations of mankind. - Egypt and Babylonia; with Babylonia perhaps the older of the two. When the curtain rises upon the history of Babylonia, the known and recorded history, Babylonia is already an old civilization inhabited first by an unsemitic people known as the Samerians, who were attracted to that part of the world by the fertility of the Alluvial Plain. Babylonia was conquered about the twenty-second century before the Common Era by a semitic people to which people Abraham belonged. Abraham and his clans were living in Babylonia in a city called Ur, a modern city of Mukkeyer and some time after the twentieth century before the common era, Abraham fearing religious persecution, at ANN having arrived at a God-idea quite different from the rest of the Babylonians, emigrated from Babylonia, moving first northward and then west and southwest and settled in Canaan. And with his settling in Canaan begins the history of the Jewish people in Palestine. The early history of the Bible as recorded in Genesis is replete with references and shows unmistakably the Babylonian influence.

- 4 -According to the account given in the Bible the mythical Garden of Eden was somewhere in Mesopotamia at the confluence of the two rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris. You all know, of course, the story of the Tower of Babel. That story indicates that the writer believed that Babylonia was the original ancestral home of the entire human family; that only after the building of this tower were the peoples scattered to the four corners of the earth. The account of the creation of the world which we find in the Bible, the account of the Flood and Noah, all bear striking resemblance to similar accounts found in Babylonian cuneiform literature, which was recently found and just recently deciphered. The Babylonian accounts are undoubtedly the older. Likewise the laws of the Bible show striking resemblance to some laws in the famous code of the King Hammurabi who lived in the twenty-second century before the Common Era. But equally unmistakable is the supremacy of the Hebrew law over the Babylonian, the refining and spiritualizing process to which these laws were submitted before they were incorporated in the Mosaic code. If you will bear in mind again this veritable crescent of which I spoke you will understand much of the subsequent history of the Kingdom of Israel and of Judah. Here are two great empires. Naturally there is much of commercial contact between these two empires. The caravans which crossed to the sea, to Syria and then to Palestine itself and thereafter the shadow of Assyria, for nearly two centuries hangs over the life of the Jewish people in Palestine.

In the ninth century the great Shalmanezer II invades
Syria, defeats it and makes Israel a tributary. The following century,
the eighth century before the Common Era, Tiglath Pilesar again
conquers Samaria, the capitol city of Israel and exiles some twentyseven thousand of the best people of the country to Assyria and Media.
and puts an end to the Kingdom of Israel which was composed of ten of
the twelve tribes. And from that time on exists the myth of the lost
ten tribes.

Not all of the people of the Kingdom of Israel were exiled. But those that were scattered throughout the great land and of course in the course of time, assimilated, inter-married, and were lost to Israel.

They were lost not in the sense that we do not know in what part of the world they live today, but in the sense that they were completely assimilated by the great populace in which they were placed.

With the decline of Assyria as a great world power,
Babylonia in the south begins to wax and grow mighty and for years
the shadow of Babylonia hangs over the Kingdom of Judea. In 597 the
Jewish king against the advice of the Prophet Jeremiah, breaks his
treaty with the Babylonian king and joins forces with Egypt. Whereupon Nebuchadnezzer invades Judea, conquers it and deports thousands

And some eleven years later a second and greater disaster takes place, when the whole city of Jerusalem is destroyed, the Temple laid waste and many of the middle class exiled, all of the higher and nobler classes of the people exiled to Babyloniain the year 586. This year 586 is an important date in Jewish history.

So that in 586 and days thereafter the Judeans find themselves by the rivers of Babylon where they lifted up their voices and wept for their losses. Their sanctuary had been laid waste, their God foresaken, they were totally disheartened. But one of the miracles occurres in Babylon that frequently occurred throughout the mazing story of our people.

Great seers and prophets arise among them, like

Ezra who encouraged the people to revive their lost hopes. He tells

them that God is with them even as he was with them in Palestine;

that God is a universal God; that He can be worshipped here as well

as on the Mount in Jerusalem; and that exile is only a punishment

for their sins and that once having atoned for their sin God will

have mercy upon them and restore them to their land.

Soon they begin to take courage. They begin to rally again, wherever they find themselves and in the absence of the Temple and the sacrificial ritual, they established the Synagogue - the noblest lay creation of the Jewish people. There is no finer religious

institution in the world than the Synagogue which was created in Babylon, by these Judean exiles. Wherever Jews met, ten of them, there was a Synagogue. They had no sanctuary, they had no priest-craft, no king-craft. All that they had was a sense of devotion to God and a desire to commune with God and a desire to study. And so the Synagogue was created in Babylon.

When later some of them returned to Palestine and rebuilt the Synagogue

It existed side by side with the Temple and it was in the Synagogue when that the Rabbis taught and the children were educated. And even/the second Temple was destroyed and the people scattered over the earth, they took the Synagogue with them into exile and it has remained the focusing point in history to this day.

For a period of almost twenty-five hundred years there have been Jews in Babylon. When they returned to Judea, - when a few of them returned, relatively speaking, most of them remained in Babylon, and continued as Jews, many prospered in Babylon - when a few of them returned to rebuild the devasted country of Judea and to re-establish and rehabilitate their Jewish life.

In the year 539 you will recall Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and soon thereafter gave the Jewish exiles in Babylonia permission to return to Palestine. A year later the first group of forty-three thousand exiles under Sheshbazzar left the rivers of Babylon and returned traveling in this veritable half moon to Judea.

Soon thereafter another group under Zembabal left Babylonia for Judea. But most of the people remained. They continued their religious life. In fact their religion became spiritualized and refined in Babylonia. It became more universal in scope and more spiritual in content.

Jewish life in Judea, in the meantime, among
the returning exiles was not prospering at all. Life was hard.

The neighboring tribes under M around Palestine
seriously hampered the work of the exiles. The religious life of
the people was allow ebb and it was then that Ezra, the scribe,
left Babylon and came to Palestine.

The Rabbis of the Talmud called him the second Moses.

If not for him, Judaism would have been completely lost and would have disappeared. He instructed the people in the Law of Moses.

He re-established the Jewish holidays and customs, he trained teachers to teach the law so that Babylon in a sense saved Palestinian Jewry.

And a few years later Nehemiah, who was high in the councils of the Persian warriors was sent as a governor of Palestine to build walls around Jerusalem in order to help the people to protect themselves against the hostile peoples who lived around Judea.

And so the Jews in Judea even after it was concurred by Alexander the Great in the third century, even after the Greek Empire succumbed to the Parthian Empire which ruled for centuries, even in the third century of the Common Era, the Jews were engaged in commerce,

in trade, in agriculture. They lived in towns, villages, in the country and they were engaged in exports and imports with all secion's of the empire. Many of them became tremendously rich and very powerful in the country. The language which they spoke was the Aramaic. They did not speak Persian which is a sister language of the Hebrew.

They sent their children whom they wanted to educate in Rabbinic law to Palestine.

Until about the second century of the Common Era Palestine still retained the supremacy in Jewish life.

Hillel was born in Babylonia and was sent to Palestine to complete his education.

But after the destruction of the Temple and again

after Barkochba in Jewry in Palestine was completely

disrupted and so many were compelled to emigrate to Egypt and Rome.

Babylonia began to reach a position of importance throughout the

world and in the third century of the Common Era we have great Rabbis

in Babylonia who are establishing important academies.

Thus Rabbi Abba Rab who came to be known in Jewish
history, founded the school of Sara
. His
younger contemporary Samuel founded the great school in Neharden.
Still another Rabbi Judah ben Ezekiel founded the school of Punbeditho.
And in these academies some thousand Jewish young men study the law.

It is reported that during the two months in March and September, the month preceeding Spring and the month preceeding Autumn, a special conference of religious instruction was held in these schools and at one of these conferences twelve thousand students assembled to study the law and the lore of Israel. The final shut up of this intellectual activity, of course, was the Talmud.

The Talmud largely is the product of Babylonia. The Talmud represents the scholastic labors of three hundred years and of perhaps a thousand great scholars in Babylonia. is an encyclopedia of Jewish knowledge, jurisprudence and historic of every conceivable department of human thought. All that was discussed and deliberated upon in these academies was ultimately condensed and express in this literature which we call the For a time these discussions were not written down. It Talmud. was to be the oral law as against the written law which is the Torah. But in the fifth century, the persecutions in Babylonia and the danger that the schools would be compelled to close and much of the discussions of the Rabbis would be lost, that they decided to put into writing this law which had been passed from mouth to mouth. And as a result of their . labors, we have today that tremendous collection of books known as the Talmud of Babylonia.

That book became the most compelling book in Jewish life and to this day it is still the guide and authority for millions of Jews throughout the world.

Jewish life in Babylonia all through this century was autonomous. They were allowed to have their own local communal

organizations, their own schools, Synagogues, their own political law and spokesman, who were known as (Hebrew) the head of the activities and these (Hebrew) lived in regal state. He was a government appointee, a viceroy. He supervised the political life of the peoples of Babylon. And the head of the academies of which I have spoken, was the spiritual head and the chief Rabbi, as it were, of the communities of Babylon.

I must pass on rapidly to the history of Babylonian Jewry. That history is not without its martyrdom. No country of the world where Jews lived but has its story of suffering and martyrdom.

In the third century a new dynasty arose which persecuted both the Christian and the Jew. In the fifth century there was a most bitter and horrible persecution on which we need not dwell.

But somehow the Jewish communities in Babylon survived and in 637 a great event occurred. Babylon was conquered by the Arabs and for some hundred years thereafter, Mesopotamia, as well as came under the rule of the Arabs, a semitic people. At first they were as hostile to the Jews as they were to the Chrstians but ultimately a modus vivendi was reached.

was

Babylonia and its schools warm looked upon as the center of Jewish life throughout the Diaspora. Jews in Northern Germany, Spain, Africa, Asia Minor would write to these heads of the academies for information in questions of law, ritual, liturgy. They sent them

questions (Hebrew) and in return received answers

(Hebrew) And in the course of time these responsa actually did become quite important factors in Jewish life.

It was in Babylonia in the ninth century that the first Prayer book was compiled by one of these (Hebrew) whose name was (Hebrew). You see our prayer book passed through a long history of development. Originally we had no prayer book. Originally we had very few prayers. Originally the service in the Temple was one of ritual, sacrifice, with an occasional song by the priests. In the course of time the ritual was found insufficient and prayers were taught. A father would teach his child to pray. The Rabbi would teach his class to pray, orally, not written down. Centuries elapsed. And then an order of service was determined.

in the ninth century the prayers had become sufficiently and an order set, to be put into writing. The first prayer book was compiled about one thousand years ago. Since that time there were many revisions and our Union Prayer book does not resemble greatly that prayer book.

I must pass on to one other movement in Babylon.

Babylon was a seat of great authority. It was there that the lived who finally put the of the Talmud in its last shape.

There developed among the Jews of Babylon a movement which was anti-Rabbinic, anti-Talmudic; a group arose which said that the Rabbis had no authority to make so many laws and to insist that these laws are binding upon the people. They said, the only law that Israel has is the Bible and only the laws of the Torah are binding upon the Jews. All the other numerous laws which developed in the Mishna and the Gamorrah are creations of human beings, of little value and of less authority.

In other words, an anti-Rabbinic movement began in

Anan ben David, known as the Karaites. They were students of the Bible.

And that Karaitic sect spread like wildfire over Palestine, over Egypt and for hundreds of years was a menace to the whole of Judaism. It threatened the whole of Judaism. It was what Luther was.

Luther challenged the Catholic Church. The Karaites challenged the right of these Rabbis to interpret the Bible and to make new laws.

In a way it was a because the Bible was insufficient to guide the lives of the people.

The Laws of the Bible were sufficient in the days in which they were written which was a thousand years before the time of the Karaites.

But life became more complicated and required new laws. It was time to interpret the religious resolutions, to make possible the development of life.

The Pharisees chose the latter course. The Karaites chose the first

Let me illustrate in one illustration what I mean.

The Bible says we shall kindle no fires in our homes on the Sabbath.

Literally that means that the Sabbath must be in total darkness.

And so instead of making of the Sabbath a day of joy, it became a day of gloom.

The Rabbis said; the Sabbath is supposed to be a day of happiness. It says we shall kindle no lights on the Sabbath but you may kindle the light before the eve of the Sabbath and keep it burning on the Sabbath, so as to have light in your home.and

And so in a thousand ways new interpretations were

In Babylon, too, one of the greatest philosophers lived,

Saadia, who was the most important against these Karaites.

He, by the way, is the author of that most important work, (Hebrew

By the tenth century Babylonian Jewry began to decline. The whole economic life began to decline as a result of many political struggles. Life became insecure. Many Jews began to emigrate.

"Faith and Knowledge."

By that time another great center in Jewish life began its ascendancy. Spain from the tenth to the fifteenth century becomes the most important and most significant in Jewish history.

But many Jews continued to live in Babylonia and to this day in 1931, in the city of Bagdad there are 50,000 Jews and many more are scattered along these rivers of Babylon.

And so for four thousand years from the days of Abraham to our own day, Jews lived in that part of the world. And it may not

be at all far-fetched that in that very place, where Abraham first worshipped the one God, some Jews today, in 1931, are reciting the twice-told daily Shma Yisroel. One of those strange miracles of history. For a community to survive in a land that had been swept over by armies and empires of Assyria, Persia, Greeks, Parthians, Arabs, Mongols and Turks, to live on like some weather-beaten storm-tossed trees whose roots are unyielding. That's how the Jewish community lived in Babylon. Israel clung with unyielding roots to the shores of the Rivers of Babylon.

The same miraculous drama we shall see enacted next week when we tell the story of Jewish life on the Banks of this other terminus in this semi-circle, - Jewish life on the Banks of the Nile.

AN ABSTRACT OF THE ADDRESS
"BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON"

BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER THE TEMPLE, FEB. 8th, 1931

The history of the Jews in Babylonia is almost as extensive as their history in Palestine. And in importance it is second only to Palestine. It began with Abraham and has continued to this day.

Judaism began with Abraham in Babylonia. To Assyrian

Babylonia both Israel and Judah were exiled. In Babylonia the Synagogue
was first established. Much of the Written Law was composed in

Babylonia and from there was brought by Ezra, the scribe, to Palestine.

The Babylonian Talmud is the product of that country. The Jewish prayer
book was first compiled there. In Babylonia the first medieval Jewish
philosophers lived and wrote, as well as the first liturgical poets.

And in Babylonia, too, the great Protestant movement known as Karaism began.

Thus, Babylonian Jewry wrote a tremendous chapter in Jewish history.

The Book of Genesis is replete with references to Mesopotamia and shows unmistakably, Babylonian influence.

The mythical Garden of Eden is located somewhere at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. The story of the Tower of Babel indicates that the writers regarded Babylonia as the

original home of all the races of mankind. The Biblical accounts of the creation of the world and of the Flood bares strong resemblance to similar accounts found in the cuneiform literature of Babylonia. Many of the laws of the Bible bear striking resemblance to the code of Hammurabi. But equally unmistakable is the refining and spiritualizing process to which these laws were submitted before they were incorporated in the Mosaic code.

The shadow of the empires of Assyria and Babylonia falls over the entire political history of the Kingdom of Israel and of Judah from the Ninth to the Sixth Centuries.

During the Babylonian exile the religious life of the people was strengthened rather than weakened and the history of Israel, in Babylonia continues practically uninterrupted from that time to the present day. Jewish community life survived in Babylonia under Persian, Greek, Parthian, Arab, Mongol and Turkish rule. From the Third to the Tenth Centuries of the Common Era, Babylonia was the most important center of Jewish life in the world.

There the great Rabbinic academies were established and there, too, the Talmud was finally compiled. The spiritual leaders of the academies in Babylonia were looked upon as the authoritative spokesmen of Judaism by all of the Jewish communities in the world.

By the Eleventh Century the position of Babylonian Jewry had markedly declined and the center of Jewish life shifted westward to Spain.

There are about a hundred thousand Jews living in the Kingdom of Iraq, fifty thousand of them living in Bagdad.

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