MACCABEES AND TEMPLE PROPAGANDA

József Zsengellér
(Pápa)

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Second Temple period, the Temple of Jerusalem was the centre around which Jewish identity was organized; the Temple was the sole independent institution in the new political construction led by the Jews without foreign political intervention; the Temple was the centre of religious life keeping people together spiritually after the trauma of war, desolation and deportation. Whether we accept the “Bürger-Tempel-Gemeinde” idea of Joel P. Weinberg or not,1 the Temple of Jerusalem fulfilled these tasks. In the area of Jewish theology the exilic-postexilic period is the time of the so-called crisis theologies,2 which made the catastrophe of the exile understandable and theologically acceptable for the Jewish people: that the destruction of the abode of Yahweh, the Temple of Jerusalem did not mean the dissolution of his earthly presence; that Yahweh was still with his chosen people. This new wave of theology modified the former Zion theology enforced mostly in the time of Hezekiah and Josiah and created a new one,3 more strict in some


2 See e.g. the discussion of R. Albertz, “Das Ringen um die theologische Interpretation der politischen Katastrophe,” in idem, Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit (ATD Ergänzungsreihe 8, Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht 1992) 2: 383-413.

aspects, like the deuteronomistic thesis that there is only one chosen place of Yahweh and that is Jerusalem. This is the perfect monotemplism. All the previous statements of the prophetic or historical books were interpreted as fulfilled in the context of the new post-exilic temple which became an eschatological location as well.

Despite this strong theology based on the idea of the sole and unique temple, the practical reality was different. There was a Jewish temple at Elephantine built between the time of the Assyrian and Persian conquests of Egypt, and the existence of the temple on Mount Gerizim built according to the most recent excavations sometime during the Persian period. The coming of the new era challenged basically not the territorial situation of the Jewish people nor the political conditions, but the religious ones. The result was a divided society and divided religious staff, a profanized cult, a prohibited Torah and a defiled temple. It created several religious parties, communities and even more temples, e.g. those in Arak el-Emir and Leontopolis.


The date of the emergence of the Elephantine Jewish colony is a matter of dispute. The most plausible date is the conquest of Egypt by Esarhaddon, who transported Semitic soldiers into Egypt, and made other deportations as well (Ezra 4:2.10) or the Ethiopian campaign of pharaoh Psmmetichus (671-617 BC), who used Jewish soldiers. Cf. G. Ahlström, The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander’s Conquest (JSOTSup 145, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1993) 745-51. Another option was presented by M. Noth, Geschichte Israels (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1959) 266-67 and M. Haran, Temples and Temple-service in Ancient Israel (Oxford: University Press 1978) 46, who supposed the Jerusalemite refugees were going to serve as soldiers in Elephantine after the destruction of Jerusalem


V. Fritz, Tempel und Zelt (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 1977) 91 and M. Hengel, Judentum und Hellenismus (WUNT 10, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1973) 496-