



## News from the Nations— In A.D. 415

### **The new Esther**

*The book of Esther records how the beautiful Jewish maiden Hadassah became Queen Esther, wife of the powerful Persian monarch Ahasuerus (known to history as Xerxes), and in a position to counteract Haman's plot to destroy the Jews. Something of a parallel exists today in Persia where King Yezdigird has a Jewess, Shushan-Ducat, as wife. Unlike Esther, however, Shushan-Ducat was not plucked from obscurity but is the daughter of the Exilarch, the leader of the Jews in Persia. As such she is considered to be a descendant of King David. There is something of a parallel to Queen Esther in what she has been able to achieve, however. The Christians in Persia have been seeking power and influence in the land and for the Christian religion to be dominant. This would be bad news for the Jews. Several years ago, the king appointed a prominent Christian, Bazbadan, to be prime minister, and was thought to be considering baptism. In a shock move he has now dismissed Bazbadan and appointed Mazdak, a priest in the Persian religion who is known to be anti-Christian, in his place. Shushan-Ducat is thought to be behind this move as she is known to have been warning the king about the growing influence of the Christians. The recent move has certainly come as a relief to the Jews, who feared that the persecutions being experienced in the Roman Empire would spread to Persia, and it is widely seen as providential.*

### **Constantinople clamps down on Jewish autonomy**

The limited autonomy which the remaining Jews in the land have enjoyed under Roman rule seems to be coming to an end. For some considerable time now, the ruling Jewish patriarch in Tiberias has enjoyed the title of 'Prefect', bestowed upon him by the emperor in Constantinople. This gave him limited powers of rulership, such as the right to appoint judges to try any case involving a Jew. Now the Emperor Theodosius II has written to Governor Orlianus instructing him to strip the patriarch of the title of Prefect. Furthermore, in future only cases where both parties are Jews can be tried by Jewish judges, the building of new synagogues is banned, and it will be illegal to circumcise Gentiles who wish to be part of the Jewish faith. Hitherto the Jews have enjoyed a semi-independent status similar to that enjoyed under the Persian emperor in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah.

### **CHRISTIAN LITERATURE INCREASINGLY ANTI-JEWISH**

*It is hardly surprising that persecution of the Jews is increasing when the literature produced by leading Christian scholars is taking an increasingly anti-Jewish turn. The scholar Jerome has lived and studied at Bethlehem for some twenty years now, during which time he has produced a translation of the whole Bible into Latin, the work known as the Vulgate. His latest work is a commentary on the Bible, in which he never misses an opportunity to gloat over the misfortunes of the Jews, stressing time and time again how they deserve their persecutions and troubles as murderers of the Son of God. Over in North Africa, Jerome's younger contemporary, Augustine of Hippo, has produced a work, The Kingdom of God, in which he says that the Jews have no further place in the purpose of God and that the passages in the Bible which speak of the restored kingdom of Israel apply to the Christian church now. Such works can only inflame further Christian sentiments against the Jews.*

### **The decline of the patriarchy**

The current patriarch, Gamaliel VI, is the fifteenth of the dynasty to hold the title, which goes back to Hillel the Elder in the early first century. He is the sixth to bear the name Gamaliel, which goes back to the renowned Gamaliel the Elder, at whose feet the Apostle Paul sat, and who is famed for advising the Sanhedrin not to persecute the early Christian church, saying that if it was of man it would come to nothing and if it was of God then nothing could stop it. The latest in line is so far childless and it looks as though the dynasty will die out. Formerly the patriarch held greater powers, as the head of the Sanhedrin also, but since the two offices were separated the office of the patriarch has declined in importance.

**THE JEWS IN BABYLON**

*The fact that the Talmud was completed in Babylon and not Palestine indicates what a change there has been in the fortunes of the Jews since the days when the Second Temple stood in Jerusalem in all its majesty and Jews from all over the known world flocked there for the feast days. Under the rule of Constantinople the remaining Jews of Palestine have lived an increasingly impoverished existence while the Jews in Babylon have prospered under the tolerant rule of the Persians. Jews today exist in large numbers in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, with many of them farming the rich soil, and others prospering as merchants, trading as far away as China. In all there may be as many as two million Jews in this area. Unlike in Palestine they live in security, without fear of persecution. In consequence today Babylon and not Palestine is the centre of the Jewish world. One of the remarkable facts about Jewish history is that as one community declines so another rises to take its place. It is of course the intellectual vigour of the Jewish scholars in Babylon that has kept Judaism alive and ensured that the Jews do not become absorbed in the countries in which they dwell. The head of the Jews in Babylon is the Exilarch, an office which has existed since about 200 B.C. and is occupied by a descendant of the house of David, via King Jehoiachin, who was taken into captivity by the Babylonians.*

**Jewish persecution increases**

In contrast to the security with which they live under the rule of the Persians, Jews living in all parts of the Eastern Roman Empire are coming under increasing persecution. For example, in Antioch at the feast of Purim clashes arose between Jews and Christians over the Jewish practice of hanging, then burning, an effigy of Haman. Malicious rumours were spread that the Jews had hung and burned a Christian child, and riots ensued which the army put down. Four leading members of the Jewish community were arrested and, though the rumours were found to be totally untrue, they were heavily fined for incitement to riot.

**THE DECLINE OF ROME**

*Since the Roman Empire split into East and West in 395, with separate emperors in Rome and Constantinople, the western half has fallen on difficult times. Soon after the split, the Goths under their king Alaric attacked Italy, capturing and sacking Rome in 410, though by now the capital was at Ravenna. Students of the book of Revelation see this invasion of the Goths as the first of the trumpet judgements which chapter 8 foretells would fall upon the Western Roman Empire. Now the Vandals are proving to be a menace, disputing possession of Spain with the Goths and threatening North Africa. Will this turn out to be the fulfilment of the second trumpet judgement, which seems to fall particularly upon the areas either side of the Mediterranean? Meanwhile, over in the steppes of Asia, a new power, the Huns, are thought to be on the rise, and they may yet turn out to be a further threat to the troubled empire. How long can Rome continue as a power in the West?*

**Completion of the Talmud**

The recent completion of the Babylonian Talmud was the subject of a huge celebration at Matha Mechasia in Persia recently. Even the king of Persia, Yezdigerd, was there, along with his Jewish wife Shushan-Ducat. Sixty thousand people gathered at the Great Academy, where the work has been taking place for the last twenty years under the leadership of Rabbi Ashi. No fewer than a thousand students of the academy have been involved in reviewing the entire work over the last few months. The oral law, "the tradition of the elders" as it is referred to in the Gospels, was written down by Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi (Judah the Prince) in about the year 150 in what is called the Mishna. This has six major sections dealing respectively with the cultivation of the soil and its products; the various festivals and special days; marriage and divorce; the law of torts and damages and the administration of justice; the sacrificial laws and the temple service; and the laws concerning clean and unclean things. Each section is divided into a number of tractates or treatises. Scholars in Palestine produced the Jerusalem Talmud about two hundred years later, the Talmud consisting of material which explains and amplifies the Mishna. (Strictly this material is called the Gemara, and the Talmud is the Mishna and Gemara combined.). However, the Jerusalem Talmud was never completed and the centre of Jewish scholarship moved to Babylon, under the more favourable rule of the Persians. Here the Babylonian Talmud was compiled, though according to Rabbi Ashi it will be revised further. He is not daunted by the task despite being seventy-five years old, and intends to commence it immediately.