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The Importance of Ezra

by H. L. Ellison

This paper was originally read at a Tyndale Fellowship Old Testament Study Group. Among other points of interest the suggestion about the origin of the Great Synagogue is worthy of careful consideration.

This paper makes no claim to be the result of independent research, or to bring forward new light on old problems. I have had, perforce, to give considerable thought to Ezra and his work over a considerable period of time, and here I am concerned with bringing certain aspects to a sharper focus.

I am not concerned here with the fiercely waged controversy as to the relative chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah. I am convinced that the traditional interpretation of the dating in *Ezr.* 7:7, i.e. 458 BC, is impossible, but I am equally convinced that Stafford Wright is correct in maintaining that Ezra cannot be separated from Nehemiah by putting him in the reign of Artaxerxes II and bringing him to Jerusalem in 398 BC.¹ Though I lay no weight on it, I am personally convinced that Rudolph is probably correct in placing Ezra between Nehemiah's two governorships.² I have elsewhere explained why I support the view, fairly commonly held today, that the order of Ezra's activity is *Ezr.* 7, 8, *Neh.* 8, *Ezr.* 9, 10, *Neh.* 9:1-37,³ and I am not dealing with it here.

48 I equally ignore the question as to the identity of "the book of the law of Moses" (*Neh.* 8:1). Irrespective of one's views about the history of the Pentateuch, there are no real grounds for questioning Wellhausen's opinion that it was the whole Pentateuch,⁴ in spite of Oesterley's dogmatic statement, "The older view that the Pentateuch is meant may be dismissed as out of the question".⁵ If the conclusion of this paper is correct, there can hardly be any doubt that Ezra was dealing with the Pentateuch as a whole.

Ezra read from the book in the square before the Water Gate (*Neh.* 8:1). From *Neh.* 3:26 we can infer that the Water Gate was not one of the city gates, but that it will have connected the royal precincts with the Temple area in pre-exilic Jerusalem. The purpose of Ezra's choice must have been clear enough. It was near enough to the Temple to allow prior attendance at the morning sacrifice, but since it was not sacred ground, women, the ritually unclean, and even those who for one reason or another were excluded from the religious community of Israel and its worship could attend. In his choice of site for the reading Ezra was proclaiming that the Torah was greater than the Temple and its sacrifices. This

¹ *The Date of Ezra's Coming to Jerusalem.*²

² *Esra und Nehemia* (HAT), pp.xxvii, 165ff.

³ *From Babylon to Bethlehem*, ch.8.

⁴ *Geschichte Israels* I, p.421, cf. J. Bright, *History of Israel*,² p.391

⁵ *A History of Israel* II, p.135.

was, perhaps underlined by the fact that no priest, apart from Ezra himself, seems to have played any leading part in the ceremony.

Some commentators find difficulty in the change from tears to rejoicing in Neh. 8:9,12. Rudolph seeks to avoid it by making v.12 refer to the words of Ezra and the Levites in vv.9-11.⁶ This is, however, most improbable, for it would make the people's "great rejoicing" a purely formal and almost hypocritical reaction to the sacredness of the day, which is most improbable. Rather their joy came from the fact that they had realized that the Torah had now been entrusted to them and not exclusively to the religious leaders. All the standard English translations seem to support this interpretation.

It lies outside my purpose to consider Ezra's background in Babylonia which in no way affects Oesterley and Box's judgment on Ezrā, "Ezra, in fact, may justly be described as the 'founder of Judaism'."⁷ We can reasonably assume that he had considerable support for his views there, but there is no adequate evidence to show whether he and his friends considered that religion stood on a higher level in Babylonia than in Palestine, or whether they thought that they could not win over Babylonian Jewry for their views of the Torah until they had established them in Judea. One thing seems certain. B. W. Anderson is guilty of an understatement, when he says, "One of the important items in the baggage that Ezra brought from Babylonia was a copy of 'the book of the law of Moses'."⁸

But in spite of his importance, his spiritual heirs knew but little of him. Apart from the preparation of the red heifer (Num. 19), for the first recorded time since Moses, ten ordinances are attributed to him, of which G. F. Moore says, quite rightly, "Most of them, from our point of view, of a somewhat trivial character";⁹ in fact, some of them are elsewhere attributed to the men of the Great Synagogue, of whom we shall speak later.

On the other hand they misdated his return, either placing him in the return with Zerubbabel and Joshua, or bringing him back a year after the completion of the Temple.¹⁰ Equally, while Josephus records that he died soon after and was buried in Jerusalem,¹¹ it is far more likely that the tradition of his burial at Uzair in Babylonia is correct.

⁶ *op. cit.*, p.148.

⁷ *The Religion and Worship of the Synagogue*, p.2.

⁸ *The Living World of the Old Testament*, p.454.

⁹ *Judaism*, I, p.29.

¹⁰ G. F. Moore, *op. cit.* I, p.6f.

¹¹ *Ant.* XI.v.5.

But accurate information was replaced in some circles by superlatives, e.g. "When the Torah had been forgotten in Israel, Ezra came up from Babylonia and established it".¹² "Ezra was qualified to have given the Torah originally, if it had not already been given by Moses".¹³ As a climax we have the account in 2 Esdras 14 telling how the law of God had been destroyed, but how Ezra dictated ninety-four books in forty days, the twenty-four of the Old Testament, the other seventy being unidentified esoteric apocalyptic works.

In contrast to this, other voices were less friendly. It is well known that Ben Sira, about 190 BC, in his praise of famous men quite deliberately omitted Ezra, though he mentions Zerubbabel, Joshua and Nehemiah (49:11-13). More important is the epithet applied to Ezra in Samaritan literature, "the accursed Ezra, who has written words of wickedness".¹⁴ No adequate reason for such language can be offered, unless we make it refer to the Pharisaic *halakah*, or oral law, the beginnings of which we can trace back with confidence to the time and person of Ezra. We know from Jewish sources that the Samaritan *halakah* was not dissimilar but was considerably stricter.

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When we remember that the Qumran community was dominated by legitimist priestly circles and had a much stricter *halakah* than that of the Pharisees and that they called the Pharisees "speakers of smooth things", and also that the religious leaders of the Samaritans were Zadokite priests that had come originally from Jerusalem, it seems clear that the priests had their own traditional *halakah*, which differed considerably from that of Ezra and the Great Synagogue, and was almost certainly stricter than it.

Such a stricter *halakah* is offered by Jubilees, an apocryphal book placed by most moderns late in the second century BC, but which others with more probability ascribe to the late pre-Maccabean period¹⁵ or even earlier.

The outstanding feature of Jubilees, shared by Enoch 72-82 and The Testimonies of the XII Patriarchs, is that it demands a solar calendar with twelve months, eight of thirty, four of thirty-one days, i.e. 364 days in all, in contrast to the twelve lunar months of the generally accepted Jewish calendar. This solar calendar was, of course, known before the Qumran discoveries, but was regarded as purely theoretical. Since the predominantly priestly founders of the Qumran sect would hardly have

¹² Suk. 20a.

¹³ San. 21b.

¹⁴ Gaster, *Samaritan Oral Law*, p.258.

¹⁵ W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*,² pp.266f.

deliberately cut themselves off from Jewry at large by inventing and adopting a schismatic calendar after they had withdrawn to Qumran, we can reasonably assume that they had accepted it at an earlier date, and that it was one of the main reasons for their withdrawal to Qumran.¹⁶

All this points to a priestly *halakah* in contrast to that advocated by the Pharisees, and indeed this is regarded as a truism by those concerned with the controversy between the Pharisees and Sadducees. When, however, one examines the subject, so far as it is recorded in first century AD and Tannaitic literature — the evidence is conveniently summarized by Strack-Billerbeck — one discovers that the differences, at least from our twentieth-century point of view, are far smaller than we might have expected.¹⁷

Theologically the main difference was that the Sadducees, like the Samaritans, refused to accept anything except the Pentateuch as authoritative Scripture. In addition they denied the resurrection of the dead, but I have always suspected that this was due to their belief that this could not be proved from the Pentateuch; probably many of them hoped for it. Probably the alleged difference in views on divine sovereignty and human freedom given by Josephus¹⁸ had very little reality in fact, but is due mainly to his desire to present them in terms of Greek philosophical schools.

Seven cultic differences are enumerated, none of which were, from our point of view, very important. It is probable that in all cases the Sadducean view represented older priestly tradition, while the Pharisees will have been motivated, rightly or wrongly, by their understanding of the Biblical text. There are also seven ritual differences mentioned, once again of apparently no great importance. Finally, there are eight legal differences enumerated, some of which are hair-splitting, the whole tendency of the Sadducees being to enforce the law with stricter and more literal penalties than the Pharisees, though in one particular case the latter were more rigorous.¹⁹ Later Mishnaic judicial practice may not be appealed to for New Testament interpretation, for at that time Sadducean norms were still in force.

Even though we know from bitter experience how religious men can hate one another for the love of God over things that seem trifles to those

¹⁶ The calendar and its implications is discussed by S. Talmon in *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, Vol. IV, pp.162-199. For the calendar in general see A. Jaubert, VT, 1955 pp.250-264; 1957, pp.31-61.

¹⁷ SB, Vol. IV, 1, pp.334-352.

¹⁸ *Ant.* XVIII.i.3,4.

¹⁹ SB, *op. cit.* p.350, section 3.

outside, and, even allowing for social and political factors, we sense that there must have been something deeper in the conflict between Sadducees and Pharisees to account for its bitterness. Even the story of how John Hyrcanus turned from the Pharisees to the Sadducees suggests this.²⁰

The clue may well be given by the role played by the Men of the Great Synagogue in rabbinic tradition,²¹ though their very existence is denied by some moderns. Its position and chronological setting are given by the introductory statement of *Pirke Aboth*, "Moses received the (oral) Torah on Sinai, and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Synagogue . . . Simon the Just was one of the last survivors of the Great Synagogue". Simon is the high priest so highly praised by Ben Sira in ch.50. He lived 219-199 BC, *i.e.* just before the Maccabean struggle broke out. In other words the Great Synagogue spans a period about which we know next to nothing, but which was the seed-bed of the various movements that divided Palestinian Jewry in the three centuries that followed.

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It is my suggestion, which by the very nature of the case cannot be proved, that the original membership of the Great Synagogue is to be sought in the "magistrates (NEB, arbitrators) and judges" whom Ezra was authorized to appoint (Ezr. 7:23). It is a matter of indifference whether Ezra died in Jerusalem, worn out by his efforts, or whether he returned to his post in the "Ministry of Religious Affairs", or even if he was recalled in disgrace, as suggested by some, because of the ill-will caused by his drastic action over mixed marriages.²² Those whom he had appointed were royal officials, and their authority did not depend on Ezra's presence or even on his maintenance of his official position in Babylonia. There is no reason to think that his successor would have been of another mind or would not maintain a succession of like-minded judges, if indeed there were not some method of self-perpetuation.

With the ending of Persian rule their position will have become less secure, and it is to be noted that tradition ends the Great Synagogue with the coming of Seleucid rule over Palestine. So strong, however, had their grip on matters of *halakah* become that the Sadducees were never able to eliminate them from the Sanhedrin, even though they were a minority in it in New Testament times.

²⁰ Josephus, *Ant* XIII.x.5,6.

²¹ G. F. Moore, *op. cit.* I, p.31.

²² So both Kittel and Rudolph, though for slightly different reasons connected with his drastic dealings with mixed marriages.

This would seem to be the reason why the priestly *halakah*, which the Sadducees tried to cling to, had been whittled down to insignificance by New Testament times. Even the judicial norms, under which Jesus suffered, were to be lost before the great revolt against Rome.

I am suggesting, therefore, that the importance of Ezra lies less in the actual reforms, which he was able to carry through himself, and more in the organization, which he set up to perpetuate his views and to ensure the ultimate triumph of the system we call Rabbinic Judaism, though Normative Judaism might well be the preferable term. We are gradually discovering that there was a much wider variation in outlook among the Jews of the Inter-Testamental period than used to be recognized. In spite of this, there is no indication that there was ever any possibility that views other than those we must associate with Ezra and his followers ever had any chance of wider acceptance.