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HEBREW UNION COLLEGE

A CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF EZRA AS PORTRAYED  
IN THE BIBLE AND RABBINIC LITERATURES

BY  
BRAD LANE BLOOM

CINCINNATI, OHIO  
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## ABSTRACT

**Title of Thesis:** A Character Analysis of Ezra as Portrayed in the Bible and Rabbinic Literature

Brad Lane Bloom

**Referee:** Dr. David Weisberg

The overall goal of the thesis is to construct a profile of Ezra as he is portrayed through biblical and rabbinic Literatures. There is already an abundant amount of research about Ezra. It deals with the historical context of Ezra's life, including the religious policies which he implemented once he arrived in Jerusalem. However, it is important to understand the man, in so far as it is possible, and how his character might have affected the religious policies he instituted. Therefore the thesis will analyze how various kinds of Jewish religious literatures view the character of Ezra.

The first chapter of the thesis will describe the

biblical representation of Ezra. By analyzing the reactions of others toward him and his reactions at various key events in the story, it is possible to develop a greater understanding of Ezra. The writer maintains, that when Ezra discovers that the Jews of his homeland have intermarried with other people, he undergoes a crisis of faith. As a result, he emerges from the crisis with a more realistic understanding of his people, as well as for the limitations of his role as their leader.

The second chapter will focus on selections from rabbinic literature, seeking evidence from various midrashim and aggadic passages, in the Babylonian Talmud, for a character profile of Ezra. Rabbinic literature portrays Ezra as a role model for the sages. The rabbis attribute to him all the most important qualities necessary to be a sage. This chapter will describe Ezra as a student of Torah. He was also a scribe and a priest. He had special powers which enabled him to pronounce the Tetragrammaton. His greatness as a leader of the people could only compare to Moses or David. Some of his special qualities were self-control and loyalty to the people. Because Ezra was loyal to the people, he strove to preserve the ethnic and religious identity of the Jews.

The third chapter will present a translation of a portion of "Midrash Ezra." This is a twelfth-century midrash which was written by Rabbi Samuel ben Rabbi Nissim

of Aleppo, Syria. Thi midrash is in exegetical style. The writer has translated four chapters of this midrash; however, due to time limitations, the writer included only chapter seven. The midrash does not focus directly on Ezra's character. However, it is important to see how one rabbi in particular interpreted the book of Ezra. Rabbi Samuel ben Nissim focuses mostly on textual problems of literary and grammatical natures.

This study traces the development of one biblical person throughout different types of religious literatures. The writer believes that this kind of study will encourage rabbis to study the characters of other biblical figures.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In expressing my appreciation to my referee, Rabbi David Weisberg, the words of **Ethics of the Fathers** come to mind: "Hillel and Shammai received the tradition from the preceding. Hillel said, 'Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and drawing them near to the Torah'" (Avot 1:2). Similarly, he has drawn me closer to the Torah. He has helped me to see this thesis not only as an academic challenge but also as a religious experience. He has given me a new look on the phrase, תלמוד תורה, the study of Torah.

I thank him for his evidence in the thesis as well as his guidance on life in general. He has been a true rabbi to me. I will always be grateful to him.

I would also like to express appreciation to my typist, Karen Meyer. She has been conscientious and friendly. I only hope that I will not be the last H.U.C. student whose thesis she will type.

Finally, I want to offer my deepest gratitude and love for my wife, Linda. She has been a source of strength and comfort throughout the experience of this thesis as well as the five years of rabbinic school. Through the words of the Song of Songs, "I am my beloved and my beloved is mine," I proclaim my enduring love for you now and forever. Thus I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Linda.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF EZRA FROM THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the goal is to construct a profile of the character of Ezra from the biblical narrative. Through a literary analysis, the writer will show that a character composite can be developed. The writer maintains that when Ezra discovers that the Jews of his homeland have intermarried with other peoples, he undergoes a crisis of faith towards them. As a result, he emerges from the crisis with a more realistic understanding of his people as well as for the limitations of his role as their leader.

The writer's idea of a literary analysis is based on the work of Robert Alter. In his book, The Art of Biblical Narrative, he defines literary analysis:

By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions tone, sound imagery, syntax narrative viewpoint and compositional units."<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will analyze the major events in the story and focus on the role of Ezra in these events. The aim is not to discuss questions of historical background.

The aim is also not to reconstitute the so-called original order of the text. There are many theories concerning the authorship. C.C. Torrey in Ezra Studies, believes chapters seven through ten in Ezra and chapters eight through ten in Nehemiah were written by the author of Chronicles. He believes that the entire story of Ezra is a creation of the Chronicler. In fact, the story is a repetition of return under Zerubbabel. Also, because there is so little mention of Ezra elsewhere in the Bible, Torrey maintains that Ezra was a creation of the Chronicler's imagination. Torrey believes that Ezra-Nehemiah has no value as a history book; instead, it is a product of proposing a certain viewpoint.<sup>2</sup>

Instead the aim is to understand the text as it is without depending on sources outside of the Bible. In addition the analysis of the story will consist of chapters seven through ten and chapter eight in the book of Nehemiah. The chapter will first analyze the perceptions of significant others towards Ezra. Important figures like the king of Persia, Shechaniah and the Narrator of the story are examples. Next, there will be an analysis of Ezra's self perceptions. What are his attitudes about the people as well as about himself as the leader of the mission? And how do his own self-perceptions affect the way he relates to the priests?

The next section will deal with the crisis of faith that Ezra undergoes. The writer will discuss the extreme

mood swings: from excitement at the outset of the mission to depression as a result of being informed of the extent of intermarriage in the land. How do his emotions affect his faith in the people? What kinds of conflicts does Ezra encounter in his roles as servant of God and as advocate for his people?

The next section will describe the beginnings of the process in which Ezra comes to accept the reality of the problem of intermarriage. In addition, this section will also show how the people reacted to his initial disillusionment with the original goal of the mission. And finally, the chapter will focus on the eighth chapter of Nehemiah. The writer is not stating that chapter eight of Nehemiah belongs to or was originally part of Ezra; however, the writer feels that chapter eight helps to finish the story of Ezra. The end of chapter ten of Ezra is lacking plot development. One is not really sure what are the end results of Ezra's efforts to re-institute the temple cult or the Torah as the foundation of Judaism. More importantly, one is not sure about whether or not the people complied with Ezra's decree against intermarriage. Chapter eight in Nehemiah gives a good picture of Ezra restoring Judaism back to Jerusalem.

The writer maintains that the great ceremony of Ezra reading the Torah symbolizes the ability of Ezra and the people to achieve a mutual understanding; yet, there is no final resolution for the problem of intermarriage.

Perceptions of Significant Others Toward Ezra

The chapter begins by introducing king Artaxerxes of Persia. The narrator does not provide any genealogical background on him, yet in the same verse, the narrator begins to list the entire genealogical chart of Ezra. The narrator of the story gives the impression that Ezra is a true aristocrat by tracing his lineage all the way back to Aaron:

After these events, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah son of Hilkiah son of Shallum son of Zadok son of Ahitub son of Amariah son of Azariah son of Meraioth son of Zerahiah son of Uai son of Bukki son of Abisha son of Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron the chief priest" (Ezra 7:1-5).

The narrator's listing of Ezra's family background extends for five verses. The narrator's goal is to show that Ezra is a well-established leader in the Jewish community. He is a member of the elite. From the introduction, the impression is clear that Ezra is imbued with a sense of tradition and history. What better leader could the people follow than a man who comes from royal stock. The narrator portrays Ezra as a man of integrity because he represents a sacred tradition.

Yet there are other theories about the significance of Ezra's lineage. Firstly, Jacob Meyers in Ezra-Nehemiah states that the author probably copied the list of Ezra's pedigree from I Chronicles 6:13-15, or it is possible that the author drew from other details to make the claim that Ezra came from the Aaron-Zadok line. Yet there are

inconsistencies between the listing of Ezra's pedigree in Chronicles and Ezra:

The Ezra genealogy follows Chronicles exactly only as far as Merioth; from there on Chronicles is considerably expanded or Ezra curtailed. Chronicles has two Ahitubs, two Zadoks and Azariah's. It includes two names, Ahimaaz and Johanan, not found in Ezra.<sup>3</sup>

Torrey has a theory for the listing of family genealogy. He believes that the pedigree helps to show the legitimacy of different churches in Jerusalem and Gerizim during that time. Furthermore, it was important to prove the genealogy of families in order to know who was loyal to the Jerusalem church. They had to justify themselves amongst the entire world culture as well as amongst a local competitor.<sup>4</sup>

There are many different views concerning Ezra's role as scribe. Weisberg maintains that the word scribe means teacher rather than copyist.<sup>5</sup> Schaefer thinks Ezra was secretary for Jewish affairs in the Persian government. Mowinckel disputes it as a misconception. Meyer points out the fact that he had an important position cannot be doubted. He probably had political and religious responsibilities. One cannot know how Ezra's combined responsibilities fit in with the position held by Nehemiah and Hanani, but if Ezra was originally a Persian court officer, he must have been skilled in the scribal art; that is, in the knowledge of Jewish affairs. Meyers states that the:

...whole portion reflects a combination of religion and

government characteristic of the post-exilic period. Ezra's mission seems to have been to assist in improving the situation at Jerusalem. He was, like Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, charged with the task he carried out with zeal. He was accompanied by a contingent of Israelites and religious personnel, which indicates his primary interests to promote the religious aspects of the Jerusalem community.

The narrator continues to develop Ezra's image as a man who represents the tradition. It is said, "That Ezra came up from Babylon a scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given, whose request the king had granted in its entirety thanks to the benevolence of the Lord toward him" (Ezra 7:6). From this verse, the narrator tells of three important points that set the picture of Ezra as a man of great wisdom. The fact that he is thoroughly knowledgeable in the "Teaching of Moses" definitely lends a sense of authority and credibility to him. Ezra is following Moses in the time-honored tradition of teaching the Torah. Secondly, because of this tradition as his basis, the King of Persia agreed to give him everything that he needed for his journey. It seemed that the king of Persia also realizes the prestige of Ezra's background. Thirdly, the narrator reminds us through the phrase, "thanks to the benevolence of the Lord toward him," that God has his watchful eye over Ezra. Consequently, Ezra is unique because God has special favor for him.

In verses 10-12, the narrator begins to provide more information about Ezra's attitude toward the upcoming mission. In verse ten, "For Ezra had dedicated himself to

study the Teaching of the Lord so as to observe it and to teach laws and rules to Israel" (Ezra 7:10). The key phrase is הָכִין לְבָבוֹ, "he dedicated himself." It shows that Ezra considered the nature of his mission to be very important and serious. One could speculate that Ezra might have prepared himself for this mission a long time before it was to happen. The narrator perceives Ezra as the man who represents the tradition and the man whose responsibility it is to teach that tradition to the people.

#### The King's Perceptions

The king's respect for Ezra is brought out further in the text of his letter in verses 11-26. The letter has two orders. One, the king gives special permission to Ezra to proceed to Jerusalem and carry out the purpose of his mission. Two, he gives an order to the king's treasurers to provide Ezra with financial assistance. Meyers claims that with some exceptions, the style of the letter is similar to the Persepolis Treasury Tablets.<sup>7</sup>

Through the king's actions, it appears that Ezra was a highly respected man. He was certainly considered trustworthy in the king's eyes. The king gave him broad powers to lead his people back to Jerusalem. Verse twenty-one of chapter seven reveals the great power which the king entrusted to Ezra:

"I, King Artaxerxes, for my part hereby issue an order to all the treasurers in the province of Beyond the River that whatever request Ezra the Priest, scholar in the law of God of Heaven, makes of you is to be fulfilled with dispatch up to the sum of one hundred

talents of silver, one hundred Kor of wheat, one hundred bath of oil and salt without limit" (Ezra 7:21-22).

This verse brings out two important points about Ezra's integrity. First it proves that the king recognized Ezra to be a great leader ("Ezra the Priest and Scholar") in the eyes of Ezra's people. Secondly, the letter of Artaxerxes confirms that the king will give Ezra the wealth of his own kingdom. Surely, Artaxerxes must have believed Ezra to be a trustworthy person.

Verse twenty-five also brings the great admiration and support that Ezra enjoyed from King Artaxerxes. "And you, Ezra, by the divine wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to judge all the people in the Province Beyond the River and know the laws of your God and to teach those who do not know them" (Ezra 7:25). Somehow the phrase "divine wisdom" characterizes the king's absolute faith in Ezra and the mission. The fact that the king has charged Ezra to organize a judiciary shows that he was someone to be respected by his people and by the officials of the king in Jerusalem. It is interesting to note the king's respect for the importance of Ezra's role as teacher of tradition. Even though Artaxerxes never associates himself with the God of Israel, he still gives respect for Ezra's belief.

In verse twenty-five, "the law of God which is in your hand" could refer to the priestly edition of the Pentateuch. Moreover, that law was to be communicated to

those who were unaware of its demands. The reference may be to those persons who remained in the land during the Exile and those who intermarried with the people of the land. Significantly, Ezra had the power of imposing the death penalty upon those guilty of capital crimes (eg. idolatry, Exod. 22-20; Lev. 20:2; Deut. 13:6-10; or adultery Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22), whether against the law of God or the law of the king. This simply means that Ezra had behind him the authority of the Persian government.

#### Shechaniah's View

In chapter ten, Ezra is in the midst of praying when the people and their representative Shechaniah gathered around him to ask for forgiveness. They realized that they sinned by intermarrying with other peoples. After they proclaim their readiness to atone, Shechaniah, their spokesperson, admits these sins and charges Ezra to lead them along the road to repentance. "Take action for the responsibility is yours and we are with you. Act with resolve!" (Ezra 10:4)

Even though he knew Ezra was in a state of mourning, Shechaniah had faith in Ezra's compassion for the people. He believed in Ezra's ability to lead the people. The spirit of verse four gives the impression that Ezra was the kind of man who could be flexible and understanding. He could have just given up in the period of his disillusionment, but he had the strength to change just like the people did. The significance of this particular event

in the narrative will be explored later in the chapter.

Ezra's Self-Perceptions:  
Before the Crisis of Faith

The last part of chapter seven and the beginning of chapter eight provide valuable information for understanding Ezra's perceptions about the significance of the mission. The main events are that he thanks God for allowing him to lead this holy mission. He also thanks God for the support he has received from the king. In chapter eight there are three major events. One is the scene where Ezra assembled the people at the river Ahava to set out for Jerusalem. Secondly, he proclaims a fast for God's protection over the people during the journey. Thirdly, he charges the priests for assuming their upcoming responsibilities in the Temple. Throughout these three scenes one can glimpse into the heart of Ezra's character. The main observation is that he demonstrates a deep sense of loyalty and responsibility to God and his people. He indicated a sense of pride--as if the entire mission depended upon him.

Ezra's response to Artaxerxes's letter indicated his deep faith that God was responsible for his good fortune. "Blessed is the Lord God of our Fathers, who put it into the mind of the king to glorify the House of the Lord in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:27).

The first part of the verse focuses on Ezra's respect for God. He realizes that his mission is to do God's work. The focus is to revitalize the people by

reviving the belief in God amongst them. He is definitely concerned about his people. For example, he constantly uses the phrase "God of our Fathers." This phrase points out Ezra's sense of history combined with his vision of a future where the people will continue in their tradition to worship God in his Holy Temple.

The second part of verse twenty-eight reveals Ezra's sense of chosenness by God for the mission. "For my part thanks to the care of Lord for me, I summoned up courage and assembled leading men in Israel to go with me" (Ezra 8:28). The Hebrew word יְהוָה reveals the great quality of humility which Ezra possesses. He believes that God is on his side. He knows that God's favor is mainly responsible for his role as the leader of the great expedition. And Ezra realized that he must look to God for inspiration in order to fulfill his goal.

Verse twenty-seven in Chapter seven is the beginning of Ezra's memoirs. They are composed in the first person, the "I" and me referring to Ezra, who compiled the materials after his arrival at Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> Torrey's theory is that the use of the first person is a common literary device in ancient literature. The decision to switch from third-person to first-person depends on his own personal association with the character.<sup>9</sup>

The scene at the River highlights Ezra's pride in maintaining his credibility as well as the credibility of his God and people before the Persian king. Ezra admits

that he does not want to ask the king for troops to escort his people on the journey. "For I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us against any enemy on the way" (Ezra 8:22). Weisberg states that Ezra believed that God would protect his peoples without need of soldiers.<sup>10</sup> This part of verse twenty-three exemplifies Ezra's sense of pride. He has given the king the impression that God plays such a central role in the mission. Therefore why would there be a need for troops if this mission has been sanctioned by God! He admits that he told the king that God would protect his people. "Since we told the king, the benevolent care of our God is for all who seek Him, while his fierce anger is against all who forsake him" (Ezra 8:22). Yet does the fact that he admitted his hesitancy to ask for help imply some feelings of doubt in the mission? Had Ezra gone too far in building up the significance of God's role in this Holy mission? This verse gives a sense of the great extent of Ezra's idealism about the success of the mission. It also provides a sense of Ezra's integrity. He asked for and received the king's financial and political support. He knows that despite all the support, there are limitations to the degree of support the king can give him. Maybe Ezra's hesitancy to ask for help reveals his savvy in being sensitive to the limitations of his influences upon the king.

The idea of proclaiming a fast is another example of Ezra's faith in God. According to Weisberg, the fast and

prayer were usual devotional preparations for a new venture.<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested that there is here a subtle hint of the superiority of Ezra's methods over that of Nehemiah. Others think it was to avoid unduly attracting the attention of their future neighbors whose enmity might be further aroused thereby.<sup>12</sup>

It also could show just how much Ezra believed that God was involved in the affairs of his people. The biblical text contains phrases which point out Ezra's view that God is involved in the mission. The phrase, "the hand of God is upon us," appears many times. This phrase appears first in chapter seven, verse 11, as well as in chapter eight verses 18, 22 and 31. In chapter seven, the phrase refers to Ezra's praise of God for convincing the king to support Ezra. In chapter eight, the phrase is used when Ezra gives thanks to God for providing him with a Levite. The next mention in chapter eight refers to his statement to the king that the Jews are in God's care. The final reference to this phrase in chapter eight is at the conclusion of Ezra's account of the safe journey the people enjoyed.

What is the implication of Ezra's giving so much credit to God for the success of the mission? The implication concerning Ezra's character is that he is a man who has absolute faith in God. Ezra feels as though he is being guided by God, as though he is a tool which is directed by God. Ezra's belief in God's role in the mission gives him a sense of security and confidence.

His attitude toward the priests highlights Ezra's confidence in the people; that is, the connection between the past and the future. His charge to them focuses on all the strengths that made him a great leader. He teaches them responsibility by entrusting them with the safe-keeping of the gold and silver for the Temple. "I entrusted to their safekeeping the weight of 650 talents of silver, one hundred silver vessels of one talent each one hundred talents of gold" (Ezra 8:26). He knows that he must learn to trust them now and teach them to appreciate the importance of their mission.

Ezra's address to those select priests and Levites reminding them of their holiness, as well as that of the contributions delivered into their care, must not be interpreted as casting suspicion on their honesty. It was rather a warning to possible robbers on the way that these valuables were under Yahweh's protection. Molestation of the bearers or theft of the sacred objects would bring tragic consequences to the guilty.

In verse twenty-eight, Ezra is sure to say that they first are consecrated to the Lord and then the vessels for the Temple. "I said to them: You are consecrated to the Lord and the vessels are consecrated, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the Lord God of your father" (Ezra 8:28). The use of the word שִׁמְשֵׁר in reference to both the priests, Levites and the vessels is supposed to make them realize the seriousness of the

mission. One would think that if they were already performing priestly functions on a regular basis that they would have already realized their divine responsibilities. The fact that Ezra reminds them may indicate that the priests and the Levites had not been practicing the ancient rituals. Therefore, as Ezra feels a sense of chosenness by God for the mission, so too does he imbue the new priestly class with the same sense of chosenness for their upcoming duties in the Holy Temple at Jerusalem.

The following verses in chapter eight (30-36) describe in detail the actions of the priest once they arrive in Jerusalem. The explicit details of their weighing the gold and silver cargo at Jerusalem and offering the prescribed numbers and types of sacrifices show how they followed through on Ezra's instructions.

In Meyer's view, verses 35-36 are from the Chronicler. The twelve bulls were offered as a whole burnt offering (Lev. 1:1-9), for all Israel (II Chron. 29:24). The twelve he-goats were for the twelve tribes of Israel. This is another instance of the author's interest in the ideal Israel.<sup>13</sup>

The final action of the priests handing the royal orders over to the Persian authorities in Jerusalem again illustrates their sense of dignity and integrity that they showed as leaders of their people. This is the same kind of dignity that Ezra possessed and tried to imbue within them. Just as Ezra saw himself as the representative of his people

before the king, so too did he try to teach the priests that they were the official representatives of the people before God and the Persian authorities in Jerusalem.

There is some question about the significance of the scene when Ezra assembled the people at the river and discovered that there are no Levites. Apparently the Levitical families lived in Casiphia. Sherebiah, the Levitical chief, consented to go along with thirty-eight brothers of the clan of Mahli. Whether the temple slaves came from Casphiah is not clear. Ezra does not give the names of the members of this group or their leaders. It may be that the decision of such a large number of Temple slaves to accompany Ezra was a factor in persuading the Levites to follow Ezra.<sup>14</sup>

One would naturally assume that if the priests were there then the Levites would also be there. Yet they were not. One can speculate that the Levites were no longer active; that is, performing their traditional rites while in exile. The fact that Ezra notices that they are not in attendance is a sign of his concern for preserving the continuity of the traditional hierarchy of the Temple clergy. Ezra could have continued without them, but the text goes to special effort to describe his efforts to organize a contingent from the Levites. Ezra's efforts reveal his concern about preserving the tradition of his people.

Crisis of Faith

In chapter nine the people inform Ezra that intermarriage has spread throughout the Jewish people. It is possible that the news of intermarriage was not altogether a shock for Ezra. This problem could have existed for a long time, and the Babylonian Jewish leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah realized that intermarriage was a threat to Jewish survival. This problem might have been the main reason, instead of restoring the Temple cult in Jerusalem, for Ezra's mission.<sup>15</sup>

However judging by Ezra's reaction to the news, he seemed to be surprised--the news starts off Ezra's crisis of faith. His crisis of faith raises doubts about his feelings towards the people and the nature of his mission. In addition, Ezra is in another crisis as he finds himself in the middle, judging the people who have sinned versus his position as their leader and advocate hoping for the possibility of repentance. Because Ezra felt responsible for the mission as well as for the people in general, his reaction to the news caused him to enter a deep depression. In verse two of chapter nine it is written:

They have taken their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed has become intermingled with the peoples of the land, and it is the officers and prefects who have taken the lead in this trespass (Ezra 9:2).

Who were the "peoples of the lands?" Meyer states that intermarriage with the "peoples of the lands" was a serious issue particularly because it involved the ruling families

of the Jews. The "peoples of the land" were not merely the mixed population, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, that filled the vacuum created by the exile of 586 BCE. As Wurthwein has shown, they were outside landholders who took over after the exile. In post-exilic times, the term "peoples of the land" never refers to Judeans, although it still means the landed class of the various districts and includes some of the groups mentioned in verse one.<sup>16</sup>

The extremity of Ezra's reaction was due to his belief in the chosenness of the people of Israel. Ezra believed that Israel was a holy race and the purity of the race had to be preserved. Meyer speculates that the leaders who committed the sin of intermarriage were from those who had remained in the land or who had returned in the early stages of repatriation.<sup>17</sup> The news is clear and Ezra reacts immediately. His reaction could be compared to the shock experienced from the news of a sudden death. Meyers says that Ezra's period of mourning took place in the plaza before the Temple. His actions represented not only his shame but God's disappointment in Israel.<sup>18</sup>

"When I heard this, I rent my garment and robe, I tore hair out of my head and beard, and I sat desolate" (Ezra 9:3). Ezra feels a personal loss. The word משומם or desolate describes Ezra's disillusionment and despair. He had gone from enthusiasm to depression.

Ezra begins a period of withdrawal. In contrast to his general nature of providing inspiration to the people

and directing them, he changes to a personality that is withdrawn. However, it seems that when the people gather around to comfort him, he ignores their presence in the midst of his mourning. The writer maintains that Ezra is totally aware that his behavior will serve as the role model for them. He is caught between his own personal feeling versus his position as a leader of the people who must be a source of strength to them.

Ezra begins to pour his heart out to God: "Oh my God, I am too ashamed and mortified to lift up my face unto You, O my God, for our iniquities are overwhelming and our guilt has grown high as heaven" (Ezra 9:6). Again Ezra shows his sense of responsibility for the people. But he says "our iniquities," thereby indicating that the problem is not just his fault but that everyone is responsible. Possibly he is speaking on behalf of those loyalists who sat around him. Ezra intercedes on behalf of the community as the priestly figure as well as in the role of member of the community. Nehemiah, a layman, expressed the same attitude in his prayer (Neh. 1:5-11). The principle of identification with the community is present in other Jewish writings.<sup>19</sup>

In the next verse, Ezra reverses his traditional positive attitude toward the history of his people. "From the time of our fathers to this very day, we have been deep in guilt. Because of our iniquities, we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to foreign kings, to the

sword, to captivity, to pillage and to humiliation, as is now the case" (Ezra 9:7). Suddenly, Ezra expresses his anger with the people. And then he reveals his frustration about the past deeds of the Jews. But he does not disassociate himself from his people. He is a part of his people and shares in their distress. One cannot help but believe that his outcry is for the sake of the people who gathered around him as well as for God.

In verse eight, Ezra says, "But now, for a short while there has been a reprieve from the Lord our God, who granted us a surviving remanents and given us a stake in his holy place" (Ezra 9:8). This verse indicates Ezra's conflict between being a judge against and an advocate for his people. He has just condemned the people and blamed them as the cause for their own exile; yet, he offers a message of hope that all is not lost. The message of hope stems from Ezra's belief that God will show compassion on his people. Verse nine reaffirms the original goal of the mission:

"For bondsmen we are, though even in our bondage God has not forsaken us, but has disposed the king of Persia favorably toward us, to furnish us with sustenance and to raise again the House of our God, repairing the ruins and giving us a hold in Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 9:9).

At this point whatever doubts Ezra might have had, he has still maintained his convictions to carry through with the goals of his mission. The element of his dedication to God triumphs. In spite of his own personal anger and disillusionment, Ezra must give direction to those

around him. He has not lost sight of himself as a leader of the people. The main change in Ezra's attitude was his request that a remanent remain. It seems that Ezra was flexible enough to accept a small few who would lead a people that have gone astray. He may have addressed his plea to God, but they were meant as a charge to the loyalists who had gathered around him. Just as he had charged the priests, he felt it was important to charge this group. Only this time he gave a more realistic picture. The other difference was that Ezra had to readjust his expectations. The strength of Ezra's character is in his ability to keep his idealism in the midst of his own personal shock as well as inspire the others who looked to him for guidance.

#### Period of Renewal--Part One

Ezra's period of renewal overlaps with the period of mourning. While Ezra is in the middle of offering a message of hope, he reflects upon the significance of the land in the history of his people. In verse ten and eleven of chapter nine, Ezra sums up the fact that the people have not followed the commandments of God. And to highlight the seriousness of his people's transgressions, he alludes to God's promise of giving the land of Canaan to the Israelites. He says that the reason the peoples who lived in the land did not inherit it was because of the idolotrous practices. "Which You gave us through your servants the prophets when You said, The land which you are about to

possess is a land unclean through the uncleanness of the peoples of the land, through their abhorrent practices with which they, in their impurity, have filled it from one end to the other" (Ezra 9:11). Apparently Ezra's comment was meant to cause the people to see themselves in the light of becoming paganistic like the original inhabitants of the land. Only after warning them about the importance of not intermarrying does Ezra say the people will fulfill the ancient covenant between God and Abraham. "Now then, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons; do nothing for their well-being or advantage, then you will be strong and enjoy the bounty of the land and bequeath it to your children forever" (Ezra 9:12).

Verses eleven and twelve represent a patchwork of Mosaic and prophetic ideas brought together by the writer, possibly under the influence of the Deuteronomist, who regarded Moses as a prophet." These verses are built up of many pieces as may be seen in the parallel in words such as: (a) "the land you are going to possess" also appears in Deut. 4:5; (b) "a polluted land polluted by the peoples of the lands" appears in Lamentations 1:17; Leviticus 18:25 and 22:22.; (c) "their abominations" appears in Deuteronomy 18:9, II Kings 16:3, 21:2; II Chron 28:3 and 33:2; (d) "they have filled...it from one end to the other" appears in II Kings 21:16; (e) "do not give your daughter...: appears in Deut 7:3; (f) "do not ever seek their peace or welfare"

appears in Deut. 23:16; (h) "eat the good things of the land" appears in Isaiah 1:19, Gen. 14:18; (i) "bequeath it to your sons forever" appears in Ezekiel 37:25.<sup>20</sup>

The chapter concludes with Ezra's final admonition to the people that if they make the same mistake twice, then God will surely destroy all hope for the success of the mission. "Shall we once again violate Your commandments by intermarrying with these people who follow such abhorrent practices? Will You not rage against us till we are destroyed without remanent or survivor (Ezra 9:14).

The dialogue indicates that Ezra is really speaking to those loyalists around him. Why would he keep reviewing the problem as well as offering hope for the remanents group before God? God already knows this is the one who is giving the people a second chance. Ezra is quite aware of his audience, and by speaking as though he knows what God wants, he confirms his role as leader of the people. He gives the impression that he is the one who will take responsibility for leading the way. As always, Ezra is the main interpretor of God's will, and he teaches that the success of the mission will be in God's hands.

The strategy of reminding the people of the original covenant is typical of Ezra's sense of history and tradition. By remembering God's promise to Abraham, Ezra encourages his people to aspire for the ideal vision for a Jewish nation. He is using history to stimulate their conscience. He wants the people to see themselves as a part

of the continuum of Jewish history.

Chapter ten continues the story from chapter nine, but it switches from the first-person to the third-person, perhaps reflecting the author's use of a source other than the memoirs of Ezra. Noth thinks the switch was made by the Chronicler. Rudolph thinks this part is based on another segment of the Ezra memoir where first person replaces the third.<sup>21</sup> Chapter ten is characterized by a further development in the process of renewal. There is much more mutual respect and understanding between Ezra and the people. Many people have gathered around him in order to hear his message. By this time, he has affected many people with the importance of realizing that they have committed a serious sin. The important point is that they have made the initial effort. Before he told them what was wrong and how they could resolve the problem, now the people--not all the people but many of them--have come of their own freewill to change themselves. Shecaniah the layman came forward as spokesman for his brethren; though he is not listed as one of the guilty, he identifies himself with them as Ezra has done.<sup>22</sup> The whole significance of Shecaniah's charge to Ezra is that he, instead of Ezra, is initiating the change. His actions support the previous beliefs of Ezra, and he has picked up on Ezra's allusion to the covenant:

"Now then, let us make a covenant with our God to expel all these women and those who have been born to them, in accordance with the bidding of the Lord and of all who are concerned over the commandment of our God, and let the Teaching be obeyed (Ezra 10:3).

He believes, like Ezra, that the people can start over again. Then in verse four, the people proclaim Ezra as their leader. "Take action, for the responsibility is yours and we are with you. Act with resolve! (Ezra 10:4). This is the first time in the story that they give their support for him. This verse implies that there is now an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation between Ezra and the people.

The significance of Shecanaiah's statement is that Ezra learned that his source of authority not only came from God but from the people. Ezra realizes that he serves his people because he feels chosen by God to do so as well as because he feels elected by them.

After receiving the people's support, Ezra remained in a state of mourning:

Then Ezra arose from his place in front of the House of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib; there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he was in mourning over the trespass of those who had returned from exile (Ezra 10:6).

One would think that the time was ripe for optimism rather than a continuation of mourning. Ezra continued his state of bereavement possibly because he wanted to teach the population that it was time to make repentance. The significance is that Ezra is always aware that he is a role model. Even though he personally might have worked out the problem, he still felt a need for the people to appreciate the seriousness of their sins.

Ezra's response to the compromise offered by the people may indicate the element of flexibility in his character:

"Let our officers remain on behalf of the entire congregation, and all our townspeople who have brought home foreign wives shall appear before them at scheduled times, together with the elders and judges of each town, in order to avert the burning anger of our God from us on this account" (Ezra 10:14).

After he asked for a total cut from all intermarried relationships, he remained silent when the people shifted the problem to a committee. It is possible that Ezra had to realized that his authority would be mandated not only from God but from the people.

Period of Renewal--Part Two:  
Nehemiah Chapter Eight

The writer maintains that chapter eight of the book of Nehemiah serves as a concluding section to the period of renewal in chapter ten of Ezra. The writer will not focus his attention on whether or not chapter eight should have been included in the book of Ezra. Instead, chapter eight seems to form a kind of epilogue to the dramatic scene in Ezra chapter ten when Ezra has arranged an agreement with the leadership to study the problem of intermarriage.

Meyer maintains that the material of Nehemiah chapters eight and nine are composed of Ezra material. Yet scholars disagree as to its character and its relationship within Ezra-Nehemiah narrative. Eissfeldt regards as possible that the Chronicler composed Nehemiah seven and eight himself from Ezra memoirs and is responsible for its

present position. Noth, who thinks the passage not only consonant with the work of the Chronicler, but that only he could have been responsible for it. Schaeder places the transitional verses between Nehemiah 7 and 8 (7:22; 8:1), after Ezra 8:36. Mowinckel's opinion is that chapter 8 belongs after Ezra 10 and forms the conclusion of the Ezra story. Weisberg says that Nehemiah chapter 8-9 should follow directly after Ezra 9-10.<sup>23</sup> It does not contain an account of the promulgation of new law coming from Ezra but relates the story of a New Year's celebration rendered regular and significant by the events with which it was connected.<sup>24</sup> The preceding chapter in Nehemiah concludes with the notice that after the rebuilding of the wall, the people went to live in their cities; the priest, Levites, and some of the people, perhaps the most important ones, lived in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup>

The problem with the ending in Ezra is that there is not an outcome or resolution of the problem of dealing with intermarriage or building and rededicating the Temple in Jerusalem. Chapter eight in Nehemiah describes the public reading of the Torah by Ezra and the Priests. Unfortunately, there is no information provided about what policies were enacted to deal with the intermarriage problem and the dedication of the Temple. The writer speculates that, because there is not any further mention, the implication is that a solution was never achieved.

Therefore, the focus of the section will be on the

events of the public reading of the Scriptures. This event reveals a change in the roles of Ezra and the people. Throughout chapter ten of Ezra, he and the people began a dialogue concerning the intermarriage problem. As mentioned earlier, Ezra does not contest their suggestion on dealing with the problem. There is a new understanding between the people and Ezra. To his credit, Ezra is able to share power with the other leaders. This shows how his humility came through in a very difficult situation. And because Ezra was a humble man, he was able to maintain his integrity in the eyes of the people. Ezra realizes that he and the people are dependent on each other. This is a revelation for him because as the dialogue indicated, God was the only source of consultation and inspiration. Now he includes the people. Chapter eight highlights these changes.

The first verse in chapter eight indicates that the consensus of the people was in support of Ezra. They asked him to read the Torah. "The entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel" (Nehemiah 8:1). The presence of those who stood on his right and on his left leant weight to the occasion. Who these supporters were is not said; they may have been the heads of families or the elders."<sup>26</sup>

In verses two and three the narrator is describing the dramatic scene of Ezra reading the scrolls. The sight of

the book and Ezra in the act of opening it was the signal for the people to rise in adoration; they remained standing quietly and reverently while the reading was in progress (verse 3). The ceremony began with the blessing of Ezra and the vocal symbolic response of the people. The Chronicler again shows his hand by the position he accords to the Levites, who share with Ezra the knowledge of the law and its interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

It seems that ceremony is an important component of Ezra's character. There are many gatherings of the people before Ezra. For example, the gathering of the people at the river Ahavah; also the people gathered around Ezra when they were ready to admit their sin of intermarriage. In addition, the people gathered around Ezra in chapter ten when a compromise was worked out to refer the intermarriage problem to a committee. Yet the gathering of the people around Ezra in chapter eight is unique. This gathering is for the purpose of instruction in the law.

It is here that Ezra is fulfilling the goals of his mission. The interesting point in verses one and two is the focus that the people should understand the reading. Obviously, Ezra felt it was important that they not just do as they were told but understand its meaning. That kind of attitude reveals Ezra's belief in the integrity of all the people.

In verse four, Ezra is surrounded by many of his advisors. "Ezra the scribe stood upon a wooden tower made

for the purpose, and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah at his right, and at his left Pedaiah, Mishael..." (Nehemiah 8:4). In his position as leader, it seemed that Ezra was alone, almost separated from the people. He was separated in the sense that it was he alone who had the mission to teach the laws of the Torah to the people. Now the scene of others surrounding him on the bimah gives the impression that many others share in his mission and that he is no longer alone.

More specifically, Ezra is not the only one who teaches the people. "Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites explained the Teaching to the people while the people stood in their places. They read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:7-8). There are others who have an important role to play in revitalizing Judaism. Before it was only Ezra who had the goal of teaching the faith.

The participation of the Levites in the public reading should be considered. Elsewhere the Chronicler refers to the Levites as "the instructors of all Israel" (II Chron. 35:3), and their function as teachers seems to have been a matter of course with him. Earlier Ezra alone (verses 3-4) seems to have been the reader, but in verse eight they too read from the Hebrew while the Levites gave what he read in Aramaic and so assisted in making the law

intelligible to the whole people, though the matter is far from clear. (P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, in the 1st ed., 1947, p. 124, thinks the Targum goes back to Ezra. The rabbis thought this was the first mention of the Targum. Megillah 3a.)<sup>28</sup>

At this point, the Levites are assuming the role of teachers. The ironic point is that the Levites were hardly involved in the initial stages of the journey to Jerusalem. As mentioned earlier in chapter eight, Ezra noticed that there were no representatives from the Levites at the great assembly at the River Ahavah. He made the special effort to call up people from the Levite clans. Then in chapter eight of Nehemiah the Levites are gathering next to Ezra, teaching and translating the law, and causing the people to understand the Scriptures. The change is symbolic of a renewal of the Levites which Ezra spearheaded. The involvement of the Levites as well as the participation of other groups reflects Ezra's ability to inspire and set an example for them.

The final point relates to Ezra's charge for the people to rejoice:

Nehemiah the Tirshatha, Ezra the priest and scribe and the Levites who were explaining to the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God: you must not mourn or weep," for all the people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Teaching.

The people were cautioned not to weep on "this day" because it was a festival day to Yahweh. "This day" refers to verse two. The first day of the seventh month was the festival of

trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25), and the holy convocation (Numbers 29:1-6).

He further said to them, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength." (Ezra 8:9-12). The reference to festival joy reflects Deuteronomy (13:7,12,18; 14:26; 16:11,14), which the Chronicler followed (II Chron. 29:36; 30:25). Such eating, drinking and sharing, as signs of hospitality was associated with certain offerings (Deut. 16:11,14; 26:12; ISamuel 9:13; IISamuel 6:19). For Ezra and his people, the festival of the reading of the law was thus a joyous one.<sup>29</sup>

The response of the people to the recitation of Scriptures indicated the highly emotional and vulnerable frame of mind of the people. It is at this point that the strength of Ezra's character shines. Ezra is sensitive to the proper time for reproach and or comfort. Once he is convinced of the sincerity of their remorse, he tells them to cease crying. He tells them to rejoice. Ezra proved his ability to overcome the initial shock of their transgressions. His response represents the extent of Ezra's wisdom. He knows the limitations of his role and the role of his people. He cannot hold them accountable forever. Ezra knows that a change must begin on a note of blessing and happiness.

In addition, the Levites also encourage the people

to rejoice. They both make a point of telling everyone to stop mourning. Verse twelve truly represents the spirit of the period of renewal and reconciliation between Ezra and the people. The difference is that the people understand the importance of their sins and the need to keep their religion alive.

### Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show a progression or a period of growth within the character of Ezra. The purpose was to describe various outstanding characteristics of Ezra. Then by a textual analysis, the writer wanted to relate how the events of the story were influenced by or reflected upon Ezra's character.

The narrator of the story portrays Ezra as a man of high lineage who is certainly qualified to lead his people. He also has a sense of responsibility for the success of the mission. He attributes the cooperation of the king of Persia to God's favorable intervention. Ezra attributes much of the success to God but never complains against God when he is confronted with the intermarriage problem. Instead, during times of trouble he reaches out to God, looking for inspiration and comfort.

Ezra was a role model throughout the story. At first he was the only role model for the people. However, as Ezra charged the priests in preparation for their upcoming mission, he proved his ability to be a teacher and to imbue his followers with the same sense of responsibility

for the welfare of the people that he feels.

Ezra always maintained a feeling for tradition and history. Even the narrator described him as a scribe and teacher in the Law of Moses. In his speeches to the Priest and Levites, he made reference to the glory of his people's past. And while Ezra was in shock from the news of intermarriage among his people, he reflected negatively on the history of his people.

It is at that point of the story that Ezra became caught between his role as advocate and leader of his people versus his belief in being chosen by God to serve the people. The latter role caused him to admit that his people might not deserve to live. Yet his role as the people's leader caused him to offer words of hope to them.

From that point the period of renewal continues as Ezra met with the representatives of the local population. They are ready to repent and call on him to lead them. The unusual aspect of the reconciliation is that both parties offered their views concerning the proper course of action in response to the intermarriage problem. No longer is Ezra the source of all policies and decisions for the people. Now he listens to the suggestions of the people.

The eighth chapter of the book of Nehemiah serves as a final epilogue, show-casing the new relationship between Ezra and the people. In this chapter there is an overwhelming response of support for Ezra. He is the focal point and yet he is not the only one with an important role.

The Levites are now assuming their role of teachers like Ezra. They are following the example he set for them. His flexibility indicated how he had learned to share the leadership role. He knows that he cannot be responsible for everything. Ezra learned that he is as much dependent on the people as they are dependent on him.

Finally, there is significance in the act of Ezra telling the people to rejoice after they have publically proclaimed their sins. Ezra shows his humaneness, his compassion and understanding. His message of hope and comfort turns into joy. Ezra knows that there is a limit of how much the people need to repent for their sins. He probably feels that he and the people will make a new start. Ezra has remained the great leader he was at the beginning of the holy mission. The difference is that now he is not only the spokesman of God but spokesman of the Jewish people.

## CHAPTER ONE

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books Incorporated, 1981), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>C.C. Torrey, Ezra Studies, p.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob Meyers, Ezra-Nehemiah (Anchor Bible), p. 60.

<sup>4</sup>Torrey, p. 210.

<sup>5</sup>The New English Bible, ed. Samuel Sandmel (New York: Oxford University Press).

<sup>6</sup>Meyers, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, pp. 61-62.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup>The New English Bible.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Torrey, p. 244.

<sup>13</sup>Meyers, p. 71.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, pp. 76-77.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>20</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 79.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 84.
- <sup>23</sup>The New English Bible
- <sup>24</sup>Meyers, p. 84.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 152.
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid, p. 153.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid, p. 154.

CHAPTER TWO

EZRA AS PORTRAYED IN TALMUDIC  
AND MIDRASHIC LITERATURES

Introduction

Chapter two is an analysis of Ezra as portrayed in Talmudic and Midrashic literatures. How did the rabbis view Ezra? The writer maintains that Ezra was developed by the rabbis into a role model for all sages and rabbis. This chapter will consist of an analysis of the different qualities that made Ezra a figure to be emulated by generations of sages.

In the book, Legends of the Jews, Louis Ginsberg said that Ezra focused on two major areas in Jewish life. The first area was the spread of Torah-study to Israel. The second area was to preserve the purity of the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup> Of course in the biblical narrative, this meant the restoration not only of the public reading of the Torah itself, but also the restoration of the Temple cult. However, rabbinic sources focus more on Ezra's efforts to restore the value of Torah-study to the people. Therefore, the first section of the chapter will show how Ezra represented the value of Torah-study for succeeding

generations. Related to the importance of studying the Torah was the importance of writing a Torah. Ezra was known as "Ezra the Scribe" from the biblical story. The rabbis develop this and hold him responsible for writing down various biblical books. The chapter will also examine his role as a scribe.

The next part will discuss the significance of Ezra's knowledge of the Tetragrammaton. His ability to pronounce it proves his vast knowledge and special spiritual power. He also used it wisely, with descretion.

The chapter will discuss Ezra as compared to Moses and other biblical heroes. The writer will analyze passages that compare Ezra to Moses. Moses introduced the Torah to Israel. Ezra also restored the Torah to Israel after it had been forgotten. The rabbis believed that Ezra was the leader of his generation just as Moses was in his generation. Just as Moses was a scribe because he wrote down the Torah, Ezra was the scribe when he translated the Torah, according to Rabbinic tradition, into Aramaic for the people.

The chapter will change its focus to discuss the importance of Ezra's pedigree upon later generations of the rabbis. This issue reflected the debate between developing an aristocracy of sages versus keeping it a democratic system, which does not stress the importance of family background with regard to becoming a rabbi. Sources mention

that claiming Ezra as an ancestor, nevertheless, would enhance the prestige of a sage. However, Ezra stressed the importance of not depending on the merit of one's ancestors.

The next area of the chapter will discuss two important qualities of Ezra's character. The first is loyalty and the second is self-control. This section will mention his deep loyalty to his teacher of Torah, Baruch ben Neriah. Ezra refused to go along with the first group of Jews back to Jerusalem until his teacher would die. In addition he would not assume the role of high priest in the Temple until the rightful heir, Joshua ben Jehozadok, had the opportunity to fulfill the role. This kind of loyalty shows Ezra's respect for the order of succession of authority. His self-control also allowed him to control his Evil Inclination. Ezra believed that Torah-study was the antidote for the Evil Inclination.

The final section relates to the second area of Ezra's activities. Ezra strove to preserve the ethnic and religious identity of the people. The Haggadic passages will show the great efforts of Ezra to preserve the ethnic purity of the Jews. In other words, he was ardently opposed to intermarriage. In addition, Ezra also discouraged divorce. The section will include an analysis of a portion of the famous "Ten Regulations of Ezra" as an example of his sensitivity to and concern for harmonious relations between man and woman.

The Study of Torah is the Primary Value  
of the Sages

Rav Joseph cited a Baraita (T.B. Megillah 16b), that when Mordecai became viceroy, he received support from a majority of the people. The Sages of the Sanhedrin did not support him because he ceased to study Torah. The sages concluded from this haggadah that "Greater is the study of the Torah than the saving of lives." Rav Joseph inferred that the Torah protects a person whether he is studying it or not. Whereas the sage's precept only applies to an individual who is actually studying the Torah. This is inferred from the teaching of R. Menahem b. R. Jose. Scripture equates the commandment with a lamp. Just as a lamp protects only temporarily, so the commandments also protect temporarily. But the Torah is equated with light to tell you that just as light protects permanently, so the Torah protects forever.<sup>2</sup>

The preceding haggadah exemplifies the sage's belief that the study of Torah was the "supreme value" of Judaism. Rava believed that the study of Torah had precedence over any other activity.<sup>3</sup> This is not to imply that the rabbis did not place importance in performing good deeds; however, by creating such a powerful mystique, they presented the Torah as the linchpin or cornerstone of Judaism. Yet there were views that were more moderate. For example, Rav would

not have said that the study of Torah off-set transgressions. "Whoever has intercourse with a married woman, even if he has studied Torah, will be hunted down by her to the judgment of Gehenna."<sup>4</sup> There is a balance that the rabbis maintain between the Torah's power of improving one's moral character and the belief that studying it would actually excuse or atone for a person's sins.

In the rabbis' view, Ezra represents one of the main purporters of Torah to the Jewish people. He has preserved the Torah in two ways. First by bringing the Torah to Jerusalem, he revitalized Judaism. Secondly he was a scribe, and the authorship of many of the books from the Bible and sections from the Mishnah were attributed to him. In the following section the writer will provide a selection of haggadic passages from Talmud and Midrash which show Ezra striving to keep Torah alive in his generation. These sources highlight his devotion to the study of Torah.

The following Talmudic haggadah credits Ezra along with Hillel for restoring the practice of studying the Torah when it had been forgotten by the Jews:

What is meant by Hozloth (reed mats)? R. Abdimi b. Hamduri said Marzuble. What is marzuble? R. Abbi said, Bags filled with foliage. R. Simeon b. Lakish said, reed matting. And Resh Lakish is consistent since Resh Lakish said, May I be an expiation for R. Hiyya and his sons. For in ancient times when the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it. Some of it was forgotten and Hillel, the Babylonian, came up and established it. Yet again was it forgotten, R. Hiyya and his sons came up from Babylon and established it. And thus said R. Hiyya and his sons; R. Dosa and the sages did not dispute about reed

mats of Usha.<sup>5</sup>

The discussion centered around specific kinds of mattresses to be used in the Sukkah. Eventually, the rabbis agreed that the mattresses of Usha (a town in the Galilee) were the proper ones. Resh Lakish cites the view of his teacher, R. Hiyya, in order to establish the historical precedent for the use of the Usha reeds.

Why does Resh Lakish refer to Ezra restoring the Torah to the Jews when it had been forgotten? There seems to be a connection between the revitalization of the Usha reed mats and the revitalization of the Torah. Both had been forgotten by the people. Therefore, Resh Lakish uses the statement to compare himself with Ezra. Just as Resh Lakish hopes to restore the use of the Usha reed mats, Ezra hoped to restore the study of Torah to the Jewish people.

The following midrash from Song of Songs Rabbah shows that Ezra cherished the study of Torah. The midrash comments in the opening verse of chapter five, "I rose up to open to my beloved."<sup>6</sup> The midrash develops into a discussion about the departure of the Jews of Babylon. Cyrus, king of Persia, wandered through the streets and sees that there are no more Jews. He asks his assistant why they left. His assistant reminded Cyrus that he gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem. The midrash continues as follows:

Daniel and his associates and his company went up to Palestine at that time. They said, "It is better that

we should eat of the food of the Land of Israel and say grace for the Land of Israel." Ezra and his associates and his following did not go up at that time. Why did not Ezra go up at that time? Because he required to complete his studies with Baruch son of Neriah.

The preceding midrash illustrates the extent of Ezra's devotion to the value of Torah-study. He was willing to postpone the holy task of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. As mentioned earlier, the rabbis recognized the tension between the study of Torah and the time required to perform good deeds. Rabbinic haggadot mostly favor the combination of good deeds and Torah-study over just performing good deeds or just Torah-study. This particular midrash is an example of stressing Torah-study as the absolute value of Judaism. Ezra faces the tension of performing good deeds; that is, rebuilding the Temple versus remaining in Babylon to study Torah. His decision to give priority to Torah-study indicates his strong commitment to the value of Torah study.

In addition, the midrash raises the issue of the teacher-student relationship in Torah-study. Ezra is cast into the mold of student of Torah. His teacher, Baruch ben Neriah, is his teacher, his guide. The midrash portrays Ezra as the devoted תלמיד חכם who yearns for wisdom. The relationship between the student and teacher is an important aspect of the ritual of Torah-study. Ezra's devotion to his teacher also shows his integrity and loyalty.

One of the most famous haggadic passages about Ezra is the tradition of the "Ten Regulations" he enacted for the Jewish people.

The "Ten Regulations" are:

(1) The Torah will be read publicly in the Minchah service on the Sabbath. (2) The Torah will be read publicly on Monday and Thursday. (3) Clothes will be washed on Thursdays. (4) Civil courts will meet on Mondays and Thursdays. (5) Garlic will be eaten on Fridays. (6) The housewife rises early to bake bread. (7) A woman should wear a sinner. (8) A woman must comb her hair before immersion. (9) Peddlers selling spicery should be allowed to travel about in the towns. (10) Immersion<sup>8</sup> is required by those to who pollution has happened.

The "Ten Regulations" establish basic guidelines for three areas of Jewish life. The first one covers rules relating to the public reading of the Torah. The second one focuses on the civil legal system. The third one deals with the requirements of ritual purity and proper behavior for women. This section of the thesis will analyze regulations one and two. They are additional examples of Ezra's commitment to the study of Torah. In this case, he goes beyond the level of individual study and propagates this value in a communal setting.

The Gemara explains that the Torah will be read during the Mincha service on the Sabbath on account of the shopkeepers. They probably did not have time during the weekday to hear the reading of the Law.<sup>9</sup> The Gemara indicates that Ezra was sensitive to the realities of life and was flexible and accomodating to the shopkeepers. He

was not isolated but was very much aware that others should study Torah. In order to encourage the people to participate in the reading of the Torah, Ezra knew he had to adjust his goals to fit into the lifestyle of the people.

The second regulation establishes the public reading of the Torah on Mondays and Thursdays.

But was this ordained by Ezra? Was this not ordained even before him? For it was taught: "And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water" (Ezra 5:22). Upon which those who expounded verses metaphorically said: "Water means nothing but Torah as it says; Ho everyone that thirsteth come ye for water" (Isaiah 55:1). It thus means that as they went three days without Torah, they immediately became exhausted. The prophets among them thereupon rose and enacted that they should publicly read the law on the Sabbath, make a break on Sunday, read again on Monday, make a break again on Tuesday and Wednesday, read again on Thursday and then make a break on Friday so that they should not be kept for three days without Torah. (Therefore, why was it necessary for Ezra to enact this decree?) Originally it was ordained that one man should read three verses or that three men should together read three verses corresponding to Priests, Levites and Israelites. Then Ezra came and ordained that three men should be called up to read and that ten verses should be read, corresponding to ten batlanim.<sup>10</sup>

The Gemara specifies that Ezra ordained that three men should be called up to read and that ten verses should be recited. The decrees provide further evidence of Ezra's ability to balance the belief that Torah-study must be an integral part of Jewish life versus the willingness to accommodate the people by being aware of the other obligations in life.

The next midrash mentions Ezra as one of a select few who were able to restore Torah-study to the people when

it had been forgotten. The midrash comments on chapter eleven, verse twenty-two from the book of Deuteronomy:

"If, then, you faithfully keep all this Instruction that I command you, loving the Lord your God, walking in all His ways, and holding fast to Him" (Deuteronomy 11:22). Another interpretation is "If you faithfully keep all this Instruction ... Lest you say that the children of the wealthy, children of the elders or children of prophets are the only ones who can study. The meaning of the phrase; "If, then, you faithfully keep this Instruction," is that everyone is equal in the study of Torah. As it is written: "Moses commanded us a law, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 33:4). A congregation of priests, Levites and Israelites only refers to or is implied by the phrase "congregation of Jacob." As it is written; "You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God, you heads, your heads, your tribes, your elders and your officers even all the men of Israel" (Deuteronomy 29:9). These include those who were not in the presence of the one (Moses), who stood and preserved the Torah in Israel. Because of him the Torah was not forgotten as it had been by he who did not stand at the crucial hour. Someone like Ezra in his day or Rabbi Akibah during his time did not allow the Torah to be forgotten.<sup>11</sup>

This midrash portrays Ezra, along with Moses and R. Akibah, as a unique person who stood alone in his generation. The rabbis perceived him to be the one symbol of Judaism in his generation. He was the main catalyst for spreading Torah-study to the people. The midrash tries to teach that there are no classes of Jews who are entitled to Torah-study. The study of Torah is an obligation upon all the people.

### Ezra the Scribe

This section will focus on the rabbinic conception

of Ezra as a scribe. Various passages from Talmud will be presented to show that Ezra was the model scribe. Before the discussion of specific haggadic passages, it is important to provide background information about the position of the scribe in Jewish tradition.

The Hebrew term for scribe is "soferm." This term originates from the Hebrew root "to count." In talmudic literature it applies to the great authorities on the interpretation of the biblical texts. The scribes functioned during and after the Persian period in Jewish history. Their organization began with Ezra the Scribe and ended with Simeon the Just who was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly.<sup>12</sup>

In the Temple period the scribes were custodians of the Holy Scripture.

At first their work consisted of only writing and copying the Holy Scriptures, and of taking meticulous care in transmitting them correctly. The revisers of the Temple scrolls, who were considered to have special authority, received their salary from the Temple fund, and in all probability were priest-scribes.<sup>13</sup>

The scribe eventually expanded beyond the role of writing and caring for the scrolls. The scribe began to gain authority as a judge in civil law cases. Scribes acted in the roles of judge as well as teacher of wisdom.<sup>14</sup> That is why Jewish tradition credits the soferm as being the forerunner of the Tannaim and Amoraim of the Talmudic period.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, Urbach claims that the difference between the

scribes and the sages was similar to the difference between jurists and the ancient interpreters of the legal prescription.<sup>16</sup> The scribe fulfilled priestly functions as well as juridical responsibilities. Even though scribes entered into the realm of sage, the sage developed into an independent entity. The scribe eventually lost the prestige and wide-ranging authority once the Temple was destroyed.

Rabbinic literature highlights Ezra as a model scribe.. He is credited with reviving the style of characters in writing the Torah that Moses used when he wrote it. The rabbis also said that Ezra was the first to write down many of the biblical books as well as portions of the Talmud.

The first midrash comes from Genesis Rabbah. It comments on the following biblical verse. "And he shall dwell in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:26). The discussion supports the acceptance of a translation of the Bible: "Let the words of the Torah be uttered in the words of Japheth (Greek), in the tents of Shem." The midrash quotes from the book of Nehemiah. "And they read in the book, in the Law of God, and they gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8). The first phrase, "And they read in the book of the Law," refers to a translation of Scriptures. The second phrase, "And they gave it sense," refers to the punctuation accents. The third phrase, "And caused them to understand the reading,"

refers to the beginning of the verses. They were not marked in the original Scroll of the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

So far the midrash comments that it is permissible to write a translation of the Bible. It also clarifies that the role of the scribe was important in communicating the Torah to the people. The fact that the context of the proof text refers to Ezra and the Levites gives the impression of his impact as a scribe-sage in reviving the Torah. Once again Ezra is flexible and ready to accomodate the people's needs.

The midrash raises the issue that a scribe must write the Torah by referring to another scroll rather than writing it by memory:

R. Zera and R. Hananel said; "Even if a man is as well versed in the Torah as Ezra, he must not read it from memory and write it. It once happened that R. Meir visited Asia Minor, and finding there no Scroll of Esther, he read from memory and wrote it? In Babylonia they say: He wrote two Scrolls, he surpressed the first and kept the second as valid for use. The reason was that the first copy was<sup>18</sup> written from memory, whereas the second one was copied.

The midrash states that copying a scroll from another scroll is the only acceptable procedure. It was as if this was a basic professional ethic for a scribe. The rabbis cited Ezra as a model scribe, who would never violate such a basic tenet. The story of R. Meir shows that he realized copying the scroll by memory was not a valid procedure. The midrash pointed to Ezra as a man of great learning as well as being exact and meticulous in fulfilling

the function of the scribe. Due to his great knowledge of Torah, Ezra could have written it by memory; however, his adherence to scribal ethics prevented him from doing it.

The next haggadic passage discusses Ezra's contribution to change and modernize the Hebrew language. A Mishnah in Sanhedrin states: "that each person shall write in his own name a Sefer Torah." The Gemara raises the question whether or not everyone or just the king is responsible for writing his own Sefer Torah.<sup>19</sup> The rabbis perceived the great kings of Israel as scribes and teachers of Torah as well as political leaders. In the middle of this discussion, the Gemara focuses on to a discussion of the letters that Moses used to write the Torah versus the letters which Ezra introduced to write the Torah.

Mar Zuta or Mar Ukba said: Originally the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew characters and in the sacred (Hebrew) language. Later on in the times of Ezra, the Torah was given in Ashshurith script (modern Hebrew square writing), and Aramaic language. Finally, Israel chose the Ashshurith script and Hebrew language, leaving the Hebrew characters and Aramaic language for the hedyotoh. Who were the hedyotoh? R. Hisda answered: The Cutheans (The Samaritans so called because they were brought by Sargon king of Assyria, from Cutheia to take the place of the exiled Israelites. See II Kings 17:24.) And what is meant by Hebrew characters? R. Hisda said: The libuna'ah script.<sup>20</sup>

The Gemara credited Ezra with the responsibility of introducing the system of letters now used for Hebrew. He was the innovator, yet the Gemara also says that it was the people who finally approved the decision. The editor's comment was that Ezra changed the language to alienate the

Samaritans. This action reflected his concern for preserving the unique ethnic-religious identity of his people. Therefore, it would be unfair to view Ezra the scribe as being isolated and unaware of the problems of his people. He was certainly concerned enough to perceive the danger of other people's desire to destroy the tradition of Israel.

The Gemara continues with a discussion which compares Ezra to Moses. The writer would prefer to use this source later on in the section which addresses the subject of Ezra compared to biblical heroes; however, the latter part of the haggadah is relevant to the subject of Ezra the Scribe. The Gemara says that even though Ezra did not receive the Torah, he changed its writing: "And the writing of the letter was written in the Aramaic characters and interpreted into the Aramaic tongue" (Ezra 4:7). And again it is written, "And they could not read the writing and make known to the king the interpretation thereof" (Daniel 5:8). Further it is written: "This proves that no one else except Daniel knew the language." Therefore, Aramaic was the only language known during the days of Ezra.<sup>21</sup> The important point is that Ezra enabled the people to understand the Torah. This kind of value indicates his commitment to spreading Torah to all Jews.

As mentioned earlier, the rabbis credited Ezra with the authorship of several biblical books as well as a few

mishnah tractates. In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Baba Bathra, the rabbis state the authors of various biblical books. The following passage credits Ezra with authorship of many biblical books.

The Men of the Great Assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra wrote the book that bears his name (including the book of Nehemiah), and the genealogies of the Book of Chronicles up to his own time. This confirms the opinion of Rsb, since Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab; Ezra did not leave Babylon to go up to Eretz Israel until he had written his own genealogy. Who then finished it (the Book of Chronicles)? Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.<sup>22</sup>

Since Ezra was one of the members of the Great Assembly, he can receive partial credit for the authorship of many biblical books. The main emphasis is on his authorship of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as the chronologies which are found in the Book of Chronicles. The rabbis emphasized Ezra's determination and dedication to preserve the history of the Jews in Babylon. He is even prepared to delay his own holy mission of leading the Jews to Jerusalem in order to record the chain of genealogies of the Jews in Babylon. This particular haggadah further illustrates his commitment to tradition.

There is another passage in tractate Sanhedrin that attributes the authorship of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to Nehemiah himself:

Now let us consider the whole subject matter of the book Ezra. It was narrated by Nehemiah the son of Hachlalia. Why then was the book not called by his name? R. Jeremiah. Abba said, Because he claimed merit for himself. As it is written, "Think upon me my God for

good" (Nehemiah 5:19). But did not David say likewise, "Remember me O Lord, with the favor that thou bearest unto thy people. O visit me with thy salvation (Psalms 106:47)"? David merely supplicated his prayer. On the other hand Nehemiah was haughty.<sup>23</sup>

The previous haggadah gives credit to Ezra for authorship of these books. Even though Nehemiah was the narrator and author, he lost the privilege of being its author because of his arrogance. The rabbis, in this haggadah, see Ezra as a man who was humble. He was deserving of the honour of being the author of Ezra-Nehemiah.

The next passage mentions Ezra as being one of several people who wrote the book of Psalms:

Thy Neck is like the tower (kemigdal), of David, like David's panegyric of you in his book. And how did David eulogize you in his book? By saying, "To Him who divided the Red Sea in sunder ... and made Israel to pass through the midst of it." (Psalm 136:13-14) Builded with turrets (Talpiyoth). What means Talpiyoth? The book which was uttered by many mouths (piyoth). Ten men composed the Book of Psalms. They were Adam, Abraham, Moses, David and Solomon--these are five. With regard to these five there is no difference of opinion. Who are the other five? Rab and R. Johanan give difference answers. Rab said, Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun (the three singers of David, Chronicles 25:1), and the three sons of Korah (counted as one), and Ezra. R. Johanan said Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun are only one. Add to them the three sons of Korah (each counted separately) and Ezra.<sup>24</sup>

The midrash continues to argue over the credibility of the singers of David or the sons of Korah. Eventually, the midrash comes to support David out of all the potential authors as the authentic author of the book of Psalms.

Despite the disagreement between Raba and R.

Johanan, they not only agree on the first five (David, Solomon, Moses, Abraham and Adam), but both contain Ezra on their respective lists. It seems that Ezra's name could have been included with the first five names. The unanimity behind Ezra once again supports his reputation as a scribe. It also compliments him by showing that Ezra not only used his expertise as a scribe, but also used his poetic skills to compose the book of Psalms. Therefore, Ezra shows that his creative instincts reach into many areas and contribute to the creation of as well as the preservation of the Torah.

#### Ezra Pronounces the Tetragrammaton

The writer has found several haggadic passages where Ezra says the Tetragrammaton. There is great significance in Ezra's ability to pronounce the Ineffable Name. Therefore, the following section will review the literature about the significance of pronouncing the Tetragrammaton and introduce selected passages from rabbinic literature that show Ezra saying it.

Why can't one say the Tetragrammaton? One tradition says it is due to "apprehensive reverence." A midrash refers to Exodus 3:15:

"And God said moreover unto Moses; Thus shall you say unto the children of Israel; The Lord, the God of your fathers the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you; this is My name forever, and this is My memorial unto all generations." The midrash focuses on the expression זה לשמי לעולם (this is my name forever). The word עולם can be

read L'Allem (to conceal), that is, the word adonai (Lord), should be substituted for the Tetragrammaton.<sup>25</sup>

According to Urbach, the divine Name was endowed with power. The discovery of the secret Name of God implied control of the divinity. Various cultures and Egyptian mythology portrayed sorcerers and magicians using the Name as part of their practice of uttering divine names. These practices were prevalent in the Hellenistic and Roman periods as well as in Egypt and the land of Israel.<sup>26</sup>

In the Bible, God's name is called. "It is mentioned, when there is a desire for his blessing, for his response. But he that responds and blesses is God, not the priest by mentioning the Name."<sup>27</sup> In Temple times the high priesthood pronounced the Tetragrammaton ten times during the service for Yom Kippur.<sup>28</sup> However, he did it inaudibly so as to keep it concealed from the rest of the people.<sup>29</sup>

Knowledge of the Name was regarded as indicative of high religious and spiritual degree. Yet the rabbis also recognized that there was danger in using the Name. It was important to use restraint before deciding to mention the Tetragrammaton.<sup>30</sup>

It is said that the secret pronunciation of the Name was lost after the destruction of the Temple. Urbach concludes that it was beneficial. He maintains that the discontinuance of it was intended to prevent the "blurring of the distance between God and man and the use of the Name for magical purposes."<sup>31</sup> The custom of saying the Name

reflected a tension in the sages and the priests; to become close to God versus a feeling of distance from God. Instead of saying the Name, the sages depended upon faith and observance to teach the people how to be close to God.

The first example of Ezra saying the Tetragrammaton comes from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma. The Mishnah records the procedure for taking the scroll of the Law and presenting it to the High Priest during the service.

The High Priest then came to read. If he wished to read in linen garments he could do so. Otherwise he would read in his own white vestment. The synagogue attendant (hazzan) would take the scroll of the law and give it to the head of the synagogue."<sup>32</sup>

And the priest stands and receives it and reads.

This haggadic passage is a part of the commentary on the phrase in the Mishnah: "And the High Priest stands." The preceding question is where do they read the Scroll of the Law? Is it read on the Temple Mount; as it is said "And he read therein before the broad place that was before the water gate." (Nehemiah 8:3) R. Hisda said: In the women's court.<sup>33</sup>

The Gemara continued the discussion by describing the event of Ezra reading the Law:

"And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God." What does "great" imply? R. Joseph said in the name of Rad; He magnified him by saying the Ineffable Name. R. Giddal said: Instead he recited "Blessed by the Lord the God of Israel from everlasting even to everlasting" (Chronicles 16:36). Said Abaye to R. Dimi; But perhaps it means that he manifest him by pronouncing the Ineffable Name? He answered; One does not pronounce the Ineffable Name outside the limits of the Temple. But may one not? Is it not written; "And Ezra the scribe

stood upon a pulpit of wood which they had made for the purpose ... and Ezra praised the great God" (Nehemiah 8:4-6). And R. Giddal commented thereupon: He magnified him by pronouncing the Ineffable Name? That was a decision in an emergency."<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the ability to pronounce the Ineffable Name implied great power not only in the Name itself but in the person who said it. The Gemara portrays Ezra in the role of scribe-priest. They use his case as an example to show that one reads the scrolls on the Temple Mount. Then R. Joseph claims that Ezra said the Ineffable Name. However, the rabbis were not in total agreement with R. Joseph's statement. They knew that saying the Ineffable Name was a serious matter. That is why R. Giddal was sceptical at first and is why he offered another interpretation of what Ezra actually said. After the proof texts from II Chronicles and Nehemiah, R. Giddal eventually agreed to believe that Ezra pronounced the Name in an emergency measure.

What does this passage imply about Ezra? It shows another example of the broad range of special skills and powers that Ezra possessed. Based on the reaction of terror by the people upon hearing the Name, the rabbis indicated respect for Ezra. They believed he would have only said the name in a situation which required such extreme action. The reaction was extreme as it caused the people to call a fast and cry out in a loud voice to God for mercy. Ezra's strategy worked. It caused the people to repent.

The key point is R. Giddal's acceptance that Ezra said the Name. He finally admitted it under the condition that Ezra said it in an emergency situation. Underlying R. Giddal's statement, there exists an implicit assumption that Ezra was the kind of high priest who would use great discretion. There is such great respect for Ezra that it is very difficult for R. Giddal to refute the statement by R. Joseph. This particular haggadah tells of the great prestige that Ezra held among the rabbis. It also shows the rabbis' faith in his wisdom to act with care when pronouncing the Ineffable Name.

The second passage originates from the Jerusalem Talmud tractate Megillah. The discussion centers around the proper procedure for reciting benedictions before and after the reading of the Torah:

R. Akiba said: "What did we find (to be the established procedure for benedictions) in the synagogue?" R. Hiyya in the name of R. Ashi arose to read the Torah and said, "Blessed is the Lord." He did not say, "He who is blessed." They wanted to silence him. However, Rab said to them: "Let him alone." The tradition is observed according to the tradition of R. Akiba. R. Zera arose to read the Torah as a Cohen instead of a Levite. He recited the benediction before and after the reading of the Torah and they wanted to silence him. R. Hiyya bar Ashi said to them: "Let him alone. You are correct according to the way it was practiced." And it is written: "And Ezra blessed the Lord, the Great God." (Nehemiah 8:6). How did he glorify him? He glorified him by saying the Ineffable Name. R. Mattneh<sup>35</sup> said that Ezra glorified him by saying a benediction.

The preceding passage consisted of a discussion about the proper procedure for a blessing before and after the reading of the Torah. R. Hiyya's statement created

controversy because it appeared he said the Ineffable Name. The fact that he did not say "he who is blessed" caused the original objection. The problem with R. Zera was that he disrupted the order of the holy castes that read from the Torah. In both cases Ezra was involved in establishing a tradition. In the first matter, only Ezra knew how to say the Tetragrammaton. As mentioned earlier, the knowledge of the secret Name had been forgotten after Ezra. Therefore, because R. Hiyya did not say "he who is blessed," it implied that he could say the Ineffable Name. That was the reason why the rabbis tried to silence him. In the second matter, R. Zera changed the order from a Cohen reciting the benediction first to a Levite reciting it first. According to tradition, Ezra established the order of Cohen, Levite and Israel. It seems that R. Zera and R. Hiyya tried to establish different traditions. Yet the rabbis supported the tradition of R. Akiba. The quote from Scripture that Ezra pronounced the Ineffable Name served to remind them of the greatness of Ezra and that his tradition should be maintained. Once again the rabbinic literature portrays Ezra's image as one which is revered by the latter-day rabbis. Only he could say the Divine Name. The rabbis attributed a certain degree of wisdom in his actions. That wisdom held true in his days as well as in their own time.

Ezra Compared to Moses and  
Other Biblical Heroes

This section will provide a selection of haggadic passages which will compare Ezra to the biblical hero, Moses. The sages taught that Moses was the greatest sage. The biblical narratives state that Moses was responsible for bringing and teaching the precepts of the Torah to Israel. He preserved the value of Torah study even when the people rebelled against its teachings. If it had not been for Moses, Judaism would not have survived. Moses was the unquestioned leader in his generation.

Similarly, the rabbis acknowledged Ezra as the absolute leader of his generation. Ezra also faced a people who backslided on their faith. Ezra had to fight for the very survival of his people when he discovered that they had intermarried with foreign peoples. In both cases, Moses and Ezra were alone in their efforts to preserve the Torah. Therefore the rabbis credited Ezra with equal prestige in his generation as Moses had in his generation.

In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin, the Gemara presents a discussion which compares Ezra to Moses. The rabbis saw similarities in the two men's characters through their analysis of the respective biblical narratives:

"It has been taught: R. Jose said: Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. Of Moses it is written: "And Moses went up to God" (Exodus 19:3). And of Ezra it is written: "He, Ezra went up from Babylon" (Ezra 7:6). As the going up of the former refers to the receiving of

the law, so does the going up of the latter. Concerning Moses, it is written: "And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments" (Deut. 4:14). Concerning Ezra it is stated: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to expound the law of the Lord (his God), to do it and to teach Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). And even though the Torah was not given through him, its writing was changed through him. As it is written: "And the writing of the letters was written in the Aramaic language" (Ezra 4:7).<sup>36</sup>

The preceding haggadah taught that Moses and Ezra had three things in common. First, Moses' journey up Mt. Sinai was related to Ezra's trip to Jerusalem. The journeys were both at crucial times during Jewish history. They were also surprised and angry when they discovered the transgressions of their people. The rabbis equated Sinai and the return from captivity with equal importance. Ezra and Moses held the same position as absolute leaders of their generation. In addition they also experienced similar kinds of problems.

Second, the passage also pointed to the fact that Moses and Ezra sought to teach the precepts of the religion. Both expounded the "Law of the Lord." They were not only the main leaders (in a political sense), but also were the great sages of Judaism of their respective generations. The rabbis believed that biblical heroes, like Moses and Ezra, were sages just like the rabbis. Moses and Ezra represented the quintessential model-sage who was a scholar as well as a political leader and judge for the people.

Third, the haggadah highlighted the fact that Moses and Ezra were scribes. Moses was the great scribe who first recorded the Torah. Yet Ezra translated it into Aramaic so

that the people would be able to understand it. When he translated the Torah into Aramaic after realizing that the people could not read the Hebrew text, he indicated his readiness to be flexible and meet them halfway. Ultimately, Ezra knew that the important point was that they should study Torah -- no matter in what language it was written. Again, Ezra was portrayed as the model-sage who believed that Torah-study was the primary religious obligation in Judaism.

In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Para, there is a mishnah which associates Ezra and Moses as high priests who perform the ritual of the Red Hefer. The subject of the Red Hefer comes under the category of the laws of purity and impurity of the high priest. Ritual defilement, for which purification was provided in Temple times, was restricted to certain acts and processes:

Whoever touches the dead body of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day. Then he will be clean again. But if he fails to purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day he defiles the mishkan of the Lord, and shall be cut off from Israel.<sup>37</sup>

Even the necessary handling of the ashes of the Red Hefer used to cleanse from defilement by contact with the dead, rendered the priest unclean.

The priest shall then wash his garments and bathe his body in water. He remains unclean, until the evening and the only afterwards may he return to camp. He who has gathered up the ashes of the Red Hefer shall<sup>38</sup> also wash his garments and be unclean until evening.

According to the Mishnah:

The Red Hefer is to be burnt, its ashes collected together and laid up outside the camp in a clean place. These ashes were to be mixed with water for a water of reparation. It was a sin offering. Therefore if men or utensils become defiled, the Sin-offering water was sprinkled on them.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the ability of the Red Hefer to purify, it also can make something impure. It has always been difficult to explain the true meaning of the Red Hefer. Based upon a midrash in Numbers 9:2, Rashi claims that the nations of the world taunted Israel with regard to this paradox. For this reason, the Torah employed the term hukkah or statute; that is, a divine precept which must be observed even though it defies rational interpretation.<sup>40</sup>

In chapter two of Mishnah Parah the discussion centers around the procedures for the priest who is about to use the ashes of the Red Hefer for a Sin-offering. The priest who was to burn the Red Hefer had to undergo a process of purification. Mishnah three says that the Jews who returned from Babylon to the Temple found jars of the Red Hefer ashes that had been reserved from the ashes of previously burnt Red Hefers.<sup>41</sup>

Mishnah five states:

If they did not find the ashes from the seven earlier Sin-offerings, they could use them from six, five or four, three, two or one. Who had prepared them? Moses prepared the first one. Ezra prepared the second one, and five were prepared after Ezra. This is according to R. Meir. But the sages say; Seven since Ezra. And who prepared them? Simeon the Just and Johanan the High Priest prepared two each and Elishoenah the son of Hakkof and Hanamel the Egyptian and Ishmael the son of Piabi prepared one each."<sup>42</sup>

The preceding passage shifted attention from the similarities that Moses and Ezra shared as scribes to their roles as high priests. Moses prepared the first sin offering and Ezra the second one. Again the sages built Ezra's image as an authority in the area of custom and ritual. Not only was Ezra the guardian of ethics and wisdom, he also reigned supreme over the priestly cult in his day.

The case of the Red Heifer shows the great depth of Ezra's knowledge. Rashi stated that there was no available rational explanation for the Red Heifer. Yet one receives the impression that because Ezra and Moses performed this ritual, they must have known the reason. This situation is similar to Ezra's knowledge of the Tetragrammaton. In both cases he preserves the secret knowledge. It leads one to speculate about his special spiritual powers. Since Ezra did not pass on this secret information, it implies that he knew how to use discretion. As a high priest, he knew that he was responsible for maintaining the mystique of the entire cult.

It is important to remember that the rabbis made Moses the ultimate model sage. However, the rabbis perceived many similarities between the careers of Moses and Ezra. They drew connections between Moses going to Mt. Sinai and Ezra's trip to Jerusalem. They viewed both men as great scribes and high priests. It should be remembered that both were the unquestioned rulers of their generation.

The rabbis stressed the importance of respecting the authority of the sage in his generation. Even though Ezra did so much for Judaism, he could never be the leader in place of Moses. And the reverse is true concerning Moses; that is, he could never have replaced Ezra as the leader of his generation.

The following midrash from Song of Songs Rabbah illustrates the point that one should respect the authority of the leader of the current generation.

The judge of your generation in his time is equal to the judge of former times. R. Hillel said, "And all the congregation of them that were come back out of the captivity made booths, and dwelt in the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness" (Nehemiah 8:17). The text shows less respect to that righteous man in his grave, (by spelling the Hebrew name יְשׁוּעַ instead of the usual and more dignified יְהוֹשֻׁעַ), for the sake of So and so then living (viz Ezra). The rabbis deduced the same idea from the following verse. "The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazer, the son of Aaron the chief priest. This Ezra went up from Babylon" (Ezra 7:4). This indicates that if Aaron had been living, Ezra in his time would have been superior to him."<sup>43</sup>

The phrase, "This Ezra," instead of saying only "Ezra" emphasizes that Ezra and none other was the leader of his generation. Even though this midrash did not compare Ezra with Moses but with Aaron, the point is the same. No matter who the person was, he could not be a leader or take precedence over the generation of another sage. It was crucial to protect the integrity of the sage. Each generation built their authority and knowledge upon the foundations of the previous one.

The next passage comes from midrash Esther. It can also be found in Midrash Tehillim. This midrash comments on verse six in chapter seven in the book of Ezra. It focuses on the Hebrew word הוּא as an emphasis to the subject (Ezra) of the sentence. The use of the word הוּא is found many times next to the names of other biblical heroes. The rabbis transformed this grammatical pattern about the character of good and bad biblical figures. More clearly, there are times when the word appears next to bad characters and other times it refers to good biblical heroes.

The word "hu" is found five times in a bad sense and five times in a good sense. The five times in a bad sense are: one, He (Nimrod) was (hu), a mighty hunter before the Lord" (Genesis 10:19). Two, "This is (hu) Esau, the father of the Edomites" (Genesis 36:43). Three, "These are (hu) that Dathan and Abirah" (Numbers 26:9). Four, "This same (hu) king Ahaz" (II Chronicles 28:22). Five, "And this is (hu) Ahasuerus." (Esther 1:1). Five times in a good sense. One, Abram the same (hu) is Abraham (I Chronicles 1:27). Two, "These are they (hu) Aaron and Moses (Exodus 6:27). Three, "And these are that (hu) Aaron and Moses" (Ibid: 26). Four, "And Daniel was (hu) the youngest" (I Samuel 17:14). Hath not the same (hu) Huezchiah (II Chronicles 32:12). Thus hu, Ezra went up from Babylon" (Ezra 7:6). R. Berekiah said in the name of the rabbis of Babylon: We have one better than all of them namely, "He is (hu) the Lord our God. His judgments are in all the earth" (Psalms 105:7). This<sup>44</sup> implies that the attribute of mercy is everlasting.

Even though God is the ultimate hero, the fact that Ezra's name is mentioned in comparison with Moses and others proves that the rabbis respected him. The latter five were good because they were able to control their "Evil" and "Good Inclinations." The important point is that the rabbis placed their standards upon the biblical heroes

and associated with them the code of behavior which they followed. Ezra was a prime example of someone who lived up to these ideals.

### The Importance of Ezra's Pedigree

This section will focus on the issue of lineage and how it affected the prestige of the sage. The writer will present several haggadic passages that show how claiming descent from Ezra could have been advantageous and in other respects not helpful to the image of the sage. In rabbinic literature, there seems to be a tension between the importance of lineage versus the emphasis that background does not play any role. The upcoming section will provide an introduction to the struggle between the effect of lineage versus the belief that everyone can achieve wisdom regardless of their upbringing or social status. The haggadic passages will show that Ezra was a model to the sages because he combined nobility with good deeds.

What was the significance of lineage in the world of the sage? In terms of the conflict between the *am ha-ares* and the sage, the issue of lineage was important. On one hand, the rabbis tended to see themselves as a part of the Jewish aristocracy with Torah as the main factor determining royal lineage. For example: "It is reported in the name of R. Johanan; If one is a scholar and his son is a scholar and his grandson is a scholar, knowledge of the Torah will never cease from his descendants."<sup>45</sup> In addition, R. Jeremiah based his statement on the same verse (Isaiah 1:4). Based

on the preceding haggadah he said, "Henceforth Torah learning is hereditary in the family."<sup>46</sup> On the other hand there are an overwhelming number of statements chiding anyone who takes this view. Tanna R. Jose the priest said, "Fit yourself to study the Torah, for it is not an inheritance of yours."<sup>47</sup> This statement represented a warning to scholars not to rely on their lineage.<sup>48</sup> Urbach states that the academy was open to all and the free competition therein prevented the rise of a genealogical aristocracy in the sphere of the Torah. Yet, due to the existence of so much material admonishing the rabbis about this attitude, there must have been tension in the relations between parts of the scholar class and the general population.

The following haggadic passage reveals the prestige which Ezra's name carried in rabbinic circles. The context of this story is an attempt to depose Rabban Gamliel as the head of the Sanhedrin.

Come, let us depose him! Whom shall we appoint instead? We can hardly appoint R. Joshua, because he is one of the parties involved (Rabban Gamliel was insulting him). We can hardly appoint R. Akiba, because perhaps Rabban Gamliel will bring a curse on him because he has no ancestral merit. Let us then appoint R. Eliezer b. Azariah, who is wise and rich and the tenth in descent from Ezra. He is so wise, so that if anyone puts a question to him he will be able to answer it. He is rich, so that if occasion arises for paying court to Caesar, he will be able to do so. He is tenth in descent from Ezra, so that he has ancestral merit<sup>49</sup> and Rabban Gamliel could not bring a curse on him.

Apparently a prestigious background not only gave the rabbi honour but actually conferred upon him protection

from evil magic. R. Eliezer b. Azariah claimed that the merit of Ezra intimidated Rabban Gamliel from reciting a curse on him. In addition to claiming ancestral merit itself, R. Eliezer b. Azariah claimed his wisdom. More clearly, he not only inherited Ezra's prestige but the same degree of wisdom that his ancestor possessed. This haggadah is an example of R. Johanan's statement that knowledge of Torah flows through the generations of a sage's descendants. Therefore, by learning of the superior qualities of R. Eliezer b. Azariah, one also begins to understand that the sages viewed Ezra as a man with great knowledge, as a man who could stand up to the government (king Cyrus), as a man who had a strong will to lead his own people and who could command respect from his peers.

The following haggadah presents a more balanced view of the importance of pedigree. In this passage the rabbis show that pedigree helps, but the most important value is learning regardless of social position:

The rabbis said to R. Perida, R. Ezra, the grandson of R. Abtolos, who is the tenth generation from R. Eleazer B. Azariah who is the tenth generation from Ezra, is standing at the door. Said he to them, "Why all this pedigree? If he is a learned man, it is well. If he is a scion of noble ancestors and a learned man, it is all the better. But if he is a scion of noble ancestors and not a learned man, may fire consume him."<sup>50</sup>

In this haggadah, Ezra's name is mentioned again. The story does not focus on Ezra, but it shows how important his lineage was to the rabbis. The theme of the haggadah is different because it emphasizes learning -- not lineage as

the more important value. The story seems to characterize Ezra as representative of the mixture of nobility and learning. It has already been mentioned that Ezra descended from royal ancestry, yet Ezra did not rest upon the laurels of his nobility. Instead he developed a reputation as the source of Torah knowledge based on his own merit. Therefore, Ezra is an example, like R. Eliezer B. Azariah, of a man who possessed a sense of self respect. Ezra knew he had to earn the right to be called a sage. His conscience required him to achieve the title.

The next haggadah focuses directly on Ezra and describes his respect for lineage of the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak.

Resh Lakish said, "It was for the benefit of the sanctuary (Radaī emends, "On account of hereditary claim'), that Ezra did not go up at that time. For had Ezra gone up at that time, it would have given an opportunity to the Accuser to make mischief and say, "It is better that the high priesthood should be conferred on Ezra than on Joshua b. Jehozadak. The latter was a high priest son of a high priest, and Ezra, simply in virtue of being a righteous man, was not so fitting to be invested with the office as he. R. Simeon said, "The Holy One, blessed be He is very loth to set aside hereditary claims."<sup>51</sup>

This midrash is unique because the issue of lineage is completely ignored by Ezra's contemporaries. In the previous story the problem was giving too much credence to lineage. In this case the problem is that they do not give enough respect for lineage. It seems that Ezra viewed the importance of lineage within the context of preserving tradition and Joshua b. Hehozadak's integrity. The midrash

also highlighted Ezra's humility. He could have become high priest by popular consent: instead, he turned it down out of respect for the traditional procedure of the genealogical line as the determining factor. Here Ezra believed that lineage was the main criteria. Ezra saw himself in a different light than his peers perceived him. Again his humility prevented him from becoming high priest. The rabbis gave the impression that Ezra was a quiet scholar who was not opportunistic or manipulative. He is more concerned for the orderly process of succession according to the tradition. This respect for tradition, for the integrity of the office, and his own self respect made Ezra a great man -- a model for the sages.

#### Ezra's Qualities of Loyalty and Self-Control

This next section will present various haggadic passages that will highlight the qualities which typified Ezra as a great figure in rabbinic literature. This discussion is an outgrowth of the preceding one. In the former, the discussion mainly focused on the comparison between Ezra and Moses. There was mention of personality traits, but the thrust of the discussion pointed to skills and activities which Ezra and Moses performed. This latter discussion will deal with an analysis of selected passages with the intention of discovering the qualities of Ezra's character. By an analysis of the haggadot and midrashim, various qualities such as Ezra's loyalty and self-control will appear as important elements in his character.

The first haggadic passage emphasizes Ezra's loyalty and dedication to his teacher Baruch b. Neriah. The issue in the Gemara is the study of Torah and its role as the main value of Judaism. This haggadah can also be found in Song of Songs Rabbah. Even though the subject is the importance of Torah-study, the underlying point reveals Ezra's loyalty and respect for his teacher.

Rab or some say R. Samuel b. Martha said: "The study of Torah is superior to the building of the Temple. For as long as Baruch ben Neriah was alive, Ezra would not leave him to go up to the land of Israel."<sup>52</sup>

This haggadah implies that had it not been for Baruch, Ezra would have come back with the first wave of the returning exiles. It has been mentioned earlier how Ezra worked to spread Torah to all people. This example shows him practicing the ideals that he preaches. In the writer's view, the point of this haggadah is not the importance of actually studying Torah, as it is being loyal to one's teacher and showing gratitude and respect for the teacher. The story implies that Ezra had to resist the tide of returning exiles. It was as if they wanted him to lead them but he felt compelled to refuse out of his deep affection for Baruch b. Neriah. The quality of dedication or loyalty to a human being is certainly fully represented through Ezra's actions.

The second midrash is from the Song of Songs Rabbah. This midrash was already cited in relation to Ezra's respect for the genealogical chain of the priesthood. It was

mentioned to show Ezra's respect for the genealogical chain of the priesthood. In addition the midrash reveals several impressive qualities of Ezra's character. The midrash says that Ezra refused to go up to Jerusalem and serve as high priest because the position rightfully belonged to Joshua b. Jehozadak. Despite the fact that the people wanted him to accept the job, he declined and decided to stay in Babylon until Joshua died. The midrash gives insight into Ezra's mind when the Accuser tempts him with the position of high priest. The Accuser says that the people think Ezra is more qualified than Joshua b. Jehozadak. Fortunately, Ezra withstood the temptation to his ego. The writer infers from the midrash that Ezra knew that everyone would have supported him if he became high priest. He knew, himself, that he wanted to be high priest. However, he also knew that it was the wrong thing to do. This midrash shows several important qualities in his character. One, the passage reveals once again his loyalty to the tradition of proper succession. If his job was to restore Torah Judaism, he knew it must be done not just politically but ethically. Two, Ezra shows respect for Joshua b. Jehozadak. He was sensitive to him as he was sensitive to the feelings of his teacher. Three, it indicates a high degree of humility and self-control. It must have been enticing to be asked to become high priest. The fact that everyone wanted him must have given him great satisfaction. Yet he resisted and deferred to Joshua. Four, Ezra shows a keen sensitivity to

human nature. He knew that if he took the job it would have caused hard feeling amongst the people. Ezra was a conciliator, a man who strove to make שלום בבית "peace in the house."

The third passage focuses on Ezra's ability to control his Evil Inclination. The rabbis devoted much attention to the two Inclinations. The Evil Inclination and the good one seemed to be in constant battle and the task of the person was to control them. The Evil Inclination deserves special explanation. Just as all the angels, including Satan, are God's creatures, so, too was the Inclination created by God, only at the same time God gave man the power to rule over the Evil Inclination. Thus God said to Israel:

My children, I have created for you the Evil Inclination, (but at the same time I), created for you the Torah as an antidote. As long as you occupy yourselves with the Torah, the Evil Inclination shall not have dominion over you."<sup>53</sup>

It should also be noted that the rabbis perceived the Evil Inclination as the life driving force in man. In modern day psychology the Evil Inclination could be compared to the Id. The rabbis commented on the phrase:

"And behold it was very good" (Genesis 1:18) This phrase refers to the Evil Inclination. But is the Evil Inclination very good? Surely not. The fact is that but for the Evil Inclination, a man would not build a house, nor take a wife, nor begat children. Therefore the struggle over the Inclinations does not mean withdrawal from the world and from activity therein, but the conquest of the Evil Inclination while working in the world. The Evil Inclination ceases to be evil.<sup>54</sup> It becomes good when it is the Inclination of Life.

"All the armour of the mighty men; this includes in addition all who stand and rule over their Evil Inclination and master it like Moses in his day, David in his day and Ezra in his day. The entire generation depended on a man like him."<sup>55</sup> Therefore, Ezra in addition to Moses and David all were able to control their Evil Inclinations. These three men were all students of Torah. All of them wrote books of the Bible and remained loyal to Torah. This observation relates each to the midrash which stated that Torah was an antidote for the Evil Inclination. From this midrash one receives a small but significant insight into Ezra's character. He is a man who has control and self confidence which enables him to achieve so much good for the people. He is an example of a man who turns the Evil Inclination into the Inclination for Life.

The next section will review Ezra's character in relation to his image as an authority of rabbinic legislation. This section raises the issue of the struggle between study and practicing good deeds. There will be a general discussion on the tensions that sages encountered between their obligations to study Torah and to perform communal administration. Afterward, the writer will present several haggadic passages in which Ezra acts as an halachic authority on civil and religious issues. Once again the same Ezra, who symbolized the essence of a scholar committed to study, also serves as the legal decision-maker for the Jewish community.

There are divergent views concerning the priorities of study versus practice. There are also sources which look down on sages who take on positions of communal responsibility. From a historical viewpoint, once Rabban Gamliel died, his son did not become the Patriarch. This fact led to the appointment of Bar Kochbah as the Patriarch. The result was a separation of administration between the national-political rule and the spiritual-religious leadership of the sages. This division led to much suspicion of scholars assuming political-administrative roles in the civil government. It is therefore understandable that R. Akiba said to his son R. Joshua: "Do not dwell in a city whose heads are scholars."<sup>56</sup> R. Akiba disciple of R. Simeon b. Yohai remained faithful to his teacher's charge and prided himself on not being a judge."<sup>57</sup>

The following passage is an example of the difficulty that the rabbis had in finding a biblical figure who excelled in scholarship and communal activity:

Rabba the son of Raba, or as some say R. Hillel the son of R. Wallas also said, Between Moses and Rabbi we do not find one was supreme both in Torah and in worldly affairs. Is that so? Was there not Joshua? There was Eleazer (with him). But there was Phinehas? There were the Elders (with him). But there was Saul? There was Samuel (with him). But Samuel died (before Saul)? We mean (supreme) all his life. But there was David? There was Ira the Jairite (with him). But he died (before David)? We mean (supreme) all his life. But there was Solomon? There was Shimei ben Gera with him. But he killed him? We mean all his life. But there was Hezekiah? There was Shebnah (with him) but he was killed? We mean all his life. But there was Ezra? There was Nehemiah son of Hachaliah with him.<sup>58</sup>

The implicit assumption underlying the preceding passage is that prophets represent religious concerns and kings represent civil concerns. Both compliment each other. The haggadah also teaches that none of the figures could be adequate in both religious and civil issues. The passage is an example of the view that separated scholars from civil administration and civil leaders from religious life.

However, there also developed the view that public service was an integral part of performing good deeds. During the centuries of rule of the Patriarch, a hierarchy of protocol existed. Everyone would stand when the Patriarch entered the room. Next the Head of the Rabbinic Court came into the room. Furthermore, concerning the protocol for calling up rabbis to read from the Torah, the Galilean asked:

"Who was to be called up to the Torah after the Kohen and the Levite?" R. Isaac Nappaha said, "After them are called up scholars who have been appointed public administrators. And after them the sons of scholars whose fathers have been appointed public administrators and after<sup>59</sup> them the heads of synagogues and the general public." The positive attitude concerning the involvement of the sages in communal affairs reflected a "synthesis" of Torah with communal work.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, R. Johanan considered it a duty and a privilege for scholars to shoulder the burden of administration. This, in his estimation, was the way to obviate the appointment of unworthy people. Indeed he also said: "If you see a hypocritical and wicked man leading the generation, it were better for the generation to fly in the

air and not to make use of him."<sup>61</sup> However, he also demanded that the scholars should be "builders;" that is, should occupy themselves with the building of the world."<sup>62</sup> He asked rhetorically:

Who is a scholar that may be appointed a public administrator? Who is a scholar whose lost property may be returned to him on the basis of his general impression (without his specifying any particular marks)? Who is a scholar whose fellow townsmen are enjoined to do his work?<sup>63</sup>

Some regarded public administration as a burden which digresses from the scholar's goal to study Torah. Others viewed the scholar's participation in public administration as a duty. At this point, several haggadic passages will show that Ezra was very much involved in the duties of public administration.

Ezra established the legal procedure of holding civil court on Mondays and Thursdays. This ruling is the third rule which originated from the "Ten Regulations" of Ezra. The Gemara reveals Ezra's rationale for designating these two days for civil court. Having court on Monday and Thursday also coincides with the reading of the Torah. It is interesting to speculate whether he set the court date on account of the fact that many people would already have been in the city for the reading of the Torah, or did he designate these two days for civil court first with the idea that everyone would be in town for market. The Gemara implies that it was the first reason. Ezra was a scholar at heart and his frame of reference was the religious one. He

also proved his savvy by making the two events on the same day for the convenience of the people. Ezra was sensitive to his role in communal affairs.

Of course he was also very much involved in halachic decisions in the area of family law. There will be an entire section devoted to this topic later in this chapter. He played a crucial role in drafting legislation which dealt with obligations between husband and wife. Consequently, rabbinic literature portrays Ezra involved in two roles. One, he was involved in public administration. Two, he continued to have an influence in religious legislations. The next example of Ezra's involvement in civil law is the issue of the prosbul. The prosbul "prevents the remission of debts" (in the Sabbatical year).<sup>64</sup> More clearly, the Sabbatical year did not affect debts of which the bonds had been delivered before the court before the intervention of the Sabbatical year, such debts being regarded as virtually "exacted." By a slight extension of the precedent, the prosbul was instituted which in effect amounted to entrusting the court with the collection of the debt.<sup>65</sup> Hillel was responsible for the prosbul. The Gemara raises the issue of whether or not it is possible that the seventh year does not release?

But is it possible that where according to the Torah the seventh year does not release? The rabbis should ordain that it does release? Abaye replied, "It is a case of sit still and do nothing." Raba however replied, "The Rabbis have power to expropriate for the benefit of the public." For R. Isaac has said, "How do we know that the Rabbis have power to expropriate? Because it says:

"And that whosoever came not within three days according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited and himself separated from the congregation of captivity" (Ezra 10:8).<sup>66</sup>

Ezra is indirectly mentioned. The rabbis quoted this verse to support the view that they could confiscate property which was declared ownerless by the Bet Din, but the passage provides an understanding of how the rabbis viewed Ezra the judge. They saw him as a stern and precise judge, supporting the right of the court to expropriate ownerless property.

In continuation with this issue, the following haggadah deals with the issue of the rabbis' authority to confiscate property. In this case it is not the indigent but the criminal. The rabbis are concerned about how to handle someone who is disobedient in court. They quoted the same verse from the book of Ezra that was used in the preceding passage.

Whence do we desire that his property may be forfeited? From the text: "And whosoever comes not within three days according to the council of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited and himself separated from the congregation of captivity." (Ezra 10:8)<sup>67</sup>

In this case the rabbis referred back to Ezra as a model. They interpreted the events of the biblical narrative to be in consonance with what they were dealing with in their day. This haggadah brings out Ezra's quality as a firm judge. He is a judge who set limits and established procedures for behavior in court.

The Gemara continues this discussion and raises the

issue of what course of action can the court take against those who disturb the proceedings in a court.

Whence do we derive that we may quarrel (with an offender), curse him, smite him, pluck his hair and put him on oath? From the text: "And I contended with them and cursed them and smote certain of them and plucked off their hair and made them swear by God" (Nehemiah 13:25). Whence do we derive that we may fetter arrest and prosecute them? From the text: "Let judgment be executed upon him with all diligence whether it be unto death or to uprooting or to <sup>68</sup>confiscation of goods or to imprisonment" (Ezra 7:26).

The preceding haggadah gives a different view of Ezra's character. Throughout this chapter the writer has focused on the degree of integrity within Ezra -- the integrity he had which compelled him to stay with his teacher Baruch b. Neriah -- the same integrity he had which forced him to refuse the offer to become high priest in deference to Joshua b. Jehozadak. Now his integrity is tested in the area of the authority of the religious and civil courts. His willingness to confiscate property from those who would not show up within three days (reference to the biblical narrative), indicates his firm conviction in the authority of the communal legal system. He knew that people must learn to respect the system. Ezra believed that justice had two components. One, it had the attribute of mercy. Two, it had the attribute of judgment. Even though the literature portrays Ezra as a compassionate man, there are times, in his role as a judge, when he must adopt another role which requires him to exact punishment. For Ezra it is a matter of choosing the higher ethical standard.

In this case the standard of the judicial system takes the higher priority over the individual.

The next haggadah highlights Ezra's feeling about the importance of loyalty. This haggadah refers to the Levites, who did not show up when Ezra gathered the Jews at the river Ahavah. In tractate Yoma, it was stated:

Why were the Levites penalized by being deprived of the tithe? (A provision was made that the tithes shall not be given to the Levites in accordance with Pentateuchal laws but to the priests). R. Jonathan and Sabia are in dispute on the matter. One holds: because they did not go up (to Judea) in the days of Ezra. The other holds: in order that the priests might depend upon it during the days of their uncleanness (when terumah is forbidden to them). According to him who holds (that the Levites were deprived of the tithe) because they did not go up, one can well understand why they were penalized. According to him, however, who gave as the reason: In order that the priests may depend upon it during the days of their uncleanness were the Levites penalized for the sake of the priests. Rather, all agree that the penalization<sup>69</sup> was due to their not going up in the days of Ezra.

The Gemara plainly stated that because the Levites were not loyal to Ezra, they did not receive the tithe. There is not any discussion as to why they did not come with Ezra. The Gemara only said that they did not come up and the decision for them not to receive the tithe was a deserving punishment. In addition, it did not state that Ezra decided on the punishment. However, it seems that Ezra was responsible for it because he rededicated the Temple. If this is so, it is quite understandable that Ezra would have enacted this kind of law.

It has already been mentioned how Ezra felt very strongly about the value of commitment to a cause. The

prime example is his remaining with his teacher Baruch b. Neriah. Rabbinic literature has viewed Ezra as a man of high ideals and principles. The rabbis believed that Ezra felt that the Levites' actions were in violation of their commitment to God and the people of Israel. Therefore, since the preceding passages have already shown Ezra's capability to exact punishment when appropriate, it is not surprising that he took away their tithes.

At this stage, the chapter will focus on some of the passages which are not as complimentary to Ezra. Throughout the chapter the haggadot and midrashim have described the positive qualities of Ezra's character. There has been discussion on his devotion to Torah, sensitivity to his teacher, his skill as a scribe and high priest and his ability to be a judge. Yet there is a passage which questions his motivation for not going up to Babylon earlier.

Even though the majority of passages that refers to a particular rabbi are positive, it is natural to find passages which are critical of him. As Urbach said, "In one respect the character of the sage may be emphasized with particular and extreme sharpness, but in another respect there may be found contradicting testimonies, which are sometimes given no less prominence."<sup>70</sup> Urbach claims that conflicting testimonies of a sage do not cancel each other out, but may be explained on the basis of different experiences -- separated from one another by long intervals

of time -- occurring in the life of the same sage. Harsh expressions and words of denunciation are not infrequently clear indications of temporary reactions and not of fundamental attitudes. Undoubtedly, there are many sources whose principle aim is to speak in praise of certain sages and their virtues, but on the other hand, there are by no means lacking narratives and testimonies that are very far from the literary category of eulogies. Intentionally or unintentionally, they underline occurrences, qualities of character and deeds that are negative.<sup>71</sup>

The following midrash is a subtle criticism of Ezra's decision to remain with Baruch b. Neriah. Other midrashim have lauded Ezra for remaining loyal to his teacher. Those passages proved his commitment to the value of study over the Temple. Yet, the following story seems to have as an underlying view that the Temple should have taken precedence.

In the generation following Resh Laqish, the sages in Eretz Israel gave the following exposition: "If she be a wall" (Song of Songs 8:9). Had the Israelites gone up from exile like a wall (undivided in their entirety), the Temple would not have been destroyed a second time. Thus they found the cause of destruction of the second Temple already existed at the beginning of the era. Why did Ezra and his disciples not go up at the first time? Because he needed to clarify his lessons before Baruch b. Neriah. Then Baruch b. Neriah should have gone up! But the sages said: Baruch b. Neriah was a great man and old and even on a sedan chair he could not have been carried.<sup>72</sup>

The editor's commentary on this midrash noted that there was hostility between sages from Palestine and the sages from Babylon. Therefore, that might be the real intention behind

their criticism of Ezra and Baruch for not coming up with the first wave. From the Palestinian sage's viewpoint, Ezra's decision to remain with his teacher might have signified selfishness. Possibly, those sages thought that the Babylonian sages had lost sight of the importance of building the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus, this midrash could reflect an ideological conflict amongst the scholars on the issue of the relationship between the Diaspora and Palestinian Jewry.

Does this criticism of the Babylonian sages also imply that Ezra might have lost his sense of priority? Maybe he should have realized that the mission to rededicate the Temple was more important than remaining with his teacher. His situation could be classified as a situation where communal priorities take precedence over individual needs. It was possible that Ezra lost sight of this fact; yet, he was only human and was torn between his own feelings for Baruch b. Neriah versus the needs of the people.

### Ezra Preserves the Ethnic and Religious Identity of the Jewish People

The final section of this chapter will show that Ezra strove to maintain the ethnic and religious identity of the Jewish people. The haggadic passages will illustrate the extent that Ezra went in order to keep other peoples

from mixing with the Jews. For example, this section will present several haggadic passages in which Ezra expelled the Gibeonites from the Jews. Ezra took special pains to protect his people in order to prevent assimilation.

The second part of this section will show that Ezra opposed divorce. In addition, there will be an analysis of the rules and regulations that Ezra decreed to preserve harmonious relations between husband and wife.

The first haggadic passage is a part of the discussion over the question that if the land of Israel is greater than any other land, why is it necessary to mention that Ezra went up from Babylon?

Then why particularly state, "Went up from Babylon," let him teach he went up to Eretz Israel? This supports R. Eleazer. For R. Eleazer said; Ezra did not go up from Babylon until he made it (his people) pure like sifted flour. Then he went up. Abaye said; We learned they went up voluntarily. Rabbah said; We learned that Ezra brought them up (against their will). And they differed over R. Eleazar's dictum. Ezra did not go up from Babylon until he made it like sifted flour. Then he went up. Abaye rejects it. Until he made it like sifted flour. Rabbah supports it. Alternatively all accept R. Eleazer's dictum, but they differ in this point. One Master (Abaye) holds that he merely separated them, thereupon they voluntarily ascended (to Palestine). The other Master holds that (even so), he led them up against their will."<sup>73</sup>

Additional commentary on the Gemara explains that Ezra intentionally took Jews of inferior rank, "owing to the absence of leaders, they might mingle with the rest of the nation."<sup>74</sup> Consequently, Ezra's goal was not only to go up to Palestine but also to "purge the Jews of Babylon." The issue that the Gemara raised was whether or not the Jews

left Babylon of their own free will or under compulsion. The Gemara hinted that not everyone was as enthusiastic to leave Babylon as Ezra. One view of the Gemara maintained that Ezra was adamant about bringing everyone with him. Apparently he could not accept the idea of Jews, regardless of their social position, remaining in Babylon. The possibility that they would assimilate was untenable to Ezra.

The discussion continues to comment on Ezra's attitude toward the Jews of "inferior rank:"

Now on the view that they went up voluntarily it is well; Thus R. Judah said in Samuel's name; All countries are as a dough in comparison to Palestine and Palestine is as dough relative to Babylon. But on the view that (he forcibly) led them up, they were indeed aware of it? Granted that they were known to that generation, they were not known to another generation. On the view that they went up (voluntarily), it is well, hence it is written, "And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahavah. And there we encamped three days. And I scrutinized the people, and the priests and found there none of the sons of Levi" (Ezra 8:15). But on the view that he brought them up; Surely he was most careful with them. Granted that he had been careful with the unfit, yet he had not been careful of the fit.<sup>75</sup>

Ezra was very concerned about the segment of his people who were mentally disabled. Why did he devote so much energy to them? There are two views. One, he was concerned about them out of his natural inclination of compassion for the disadvantaged. The second reason was that he wanted to isolate them from the healthier segments of the Jewish population. Whatever the reason may be, at least he did not leave them behind. The editor to the

edition of the Soncino Talmud suggested that because the people of "low descent" voluntarily joined him, he had to scrutinize them.<sup>76</sup>

The following midrash is an example of how Ezra was dedicated to and was willing to risk his life for the holy mission of rebuilding the Temple. His enthusiasm to encourage the people to follow him indicates his zealousness to preserve the religious identity of the people:

Cyrus invades Babylon. Cyrus took the hold clothing and ornaments of silver and gold, crown of Solomon and gave them to Shashtar. He wanted them to be returned to the Temple in Jerusalem. Then, God called out to Daniel, "Daniel. Arise and proclaim throughout the cities. Arise and we shall again build the second Temple. It has already been seventy years (since the exile began). And you shall say to Cyrus, "Thus, the Lord commanded, God and you shall again build the second Temple. In addition, you will also bring Ezra the Scribe and Zerrubabel b. Shealtiel before Cyrus." And Daniel said to Cyrus everything that God had commanded him. "We will not build the House (Temple) before the tribes of Israel return and the tribe and one-half. In actuality, this Temple was not like the first one with all the tribes of Israel instead of just one and one-half tribes alone.

And Ezra passed through the cities and he proclaimed, "Arise and go forth unto the Temple so that we may return and build it a second time." But the children of Israel did not follow because they believed that Ezra was a liar. Consequently they sought to kill him. And Ezra knew and prayed to God. God heard his prayer and hid Ezra from the people. Thus, only a tribe and one-half eventually returned to the holy site. They offered sacrifices which were accepted by the Lord. And the Lord blessed them.

The preceding midrash depicts the great enthusiasm and dedication within Ezra as he gallantly tried to lead the people back to Jerusalem in order to build the second Temple. Unfortunately, all of the Jews did not follow Ezra.

Instead they believed that he was lying about the entire matter. They completely distrusted him. Rather than all the tribes returning with him, only a tribe and one-half came back to rebuild the Temple.

In spite of the fact that the people believed he was a liar, it was Daniel who recommended Ezra to Cyrus. Of course God instructed Daniel to suggest Ezra as the one capable of bringing the people back to Jerusalem. Obviously, God, Daniel and even Cyrus had faith in his words.

Yet, the language of the midrash gives the sense of Ezra's enthusiasm. Ezra goes out into the cities and meets with the people. He does not stand behind a throne sending messengers to deliver his message. Ezra goes out himself. He wants personal contact with the people. Even his words are full of energy. "Arise and go forth unto the Temple so that we may build it again." He includes himself with the people. Ezra tries to make them feel that they are all a part of the mission. He hopes that his enthusiasm will ignite them to act.

Unfortunately most of the people did not trust Ezra. There is not enough evidence from the midrash itself to know the reason. On the one hand, it was likely that the people were not excited about the idea of returning to Jerusalem. The fact that Ezra chose to use strong words like "arise, go forth" gives the impression that the people might have been apathetic to the idea. On the other hand, they were excited

enough over Ezra's message to try to kill him. It is possible that the people had encountered others who told them it was time to return to Jerusalem. By the time Ezra entered the scene, the people were suspicious of anyone who charged them to build the second Temple. They might have imagined that Ezra was just another false prophet.

Fortunately, a tribe and one-half did have faith in him. They followed Ezra to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple. The fact that the midrash concludes with the mention that their sacrifices were accepted by God, ultimately vindicates Ezra. Therefore, his enthusiasm for the mission did break through walls of mistrust in the minds and hearts of the people. Ezra appears in this midrash to be a man of action, passionately devoted to the cause of reuniting his people. He is not afraid to meet them face to face because he has faith in himself, the mission and in the people. Even though some of the people believed in him, he was not dissuaded from the task which God commanded him. He will rebuild Judaism and the Jewish people with whosoever follows him.

In the next midrash, Ezra comforts his people as they prepare to depart for Jerusalem. The midrash itself deals with the theme that no one man can stand up against the anger of the Lord. However, if Israel is united and prepared to trust in the Lord after it has sinned, it will survive God's wrath. The mention of Ezra is an example of how the people had to stay together in order to survive the

journey to Jerusalem.

"I will bear my indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me; he will bring me forth into the light and I shall behold your righteousness" (Micah 1:9). The preceding verse is clarified by the following quote from the book of Ezra. "For I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us against all who forsake Him" (Ezra 8:22). The nations of the world said unto Israel, "You say; I will bear the indignation of the Lord, ... If so how do you respond to the following verse, "Who can stand before his wrath/ Who can resist his fury? His anger pours out like fire, And rocks are shattered before him" (Nahum 1:6). Against his agents no man can stand up against him,<sup>78</sup> But against this anger you are able to withstand him."

The belief in God's mercy and compassion to forgive the sins of man is the main theme in the midrash. God's ability to forgive is dependent on man's willingness to admit sin and readiness to return to God. The verse teaches that as long as man repents he can withstand the punishment that he deserves because ultimately God's forgiveness is the greatest of all rewards. The rest of the midrash develops the theme of man's ability to realize his sins, be prepared for punishment, and at the same time have faith that God's love for his people will triumph over his anger.

The mention of Ezra is an example of an individual who knew that the dangers of the journey were symbolic of potential encounter with God's wrath. Yet, his inability to ask the king for help is an example of his faith that God would lead the people to safety in Jerusalem. Even though he was tempted, he knew he could not depend on the king. Only God could guarantee the safety of the people. In

addition, only if the people trusted in God could they expect God to protect them.

In this midrash Ezra represents the conscience of the people. He is scared about the potential danger of the great journey. He feels insecure that there should be protection for the people. However, despite his insecurity he trusts that God will protect the people. Through the midrash, one can see the depth of Ezra's faith in God. It would be understandable for Ezra to request assistance from the king. Yet he knows he must prove the point not only to himself but to the Jewish people as well as the Babylonians who represent the nations of the world. His integrity as well as the integrity of the entire faith in God is at stake. In a sense Ezra had to overcome his own doubts and take a leap of faith, believing that God's compassion would protect the people and help them to renew Judaism. Ezra not only sets an example for his people but sets an example to the entire world that if man follows in God's path, God's mercy and compassion will favor him.

The next passage is the first one in a series of haggadot which depict Ezra expelling the Gibeonites out of the land of Israel. The reference to the Gibeonites appears in the Second book of Samuel. "The king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel" (Numbers 2:12). The rabbis used this verse to represent an example of the importance of keeping the Jews separate from them as well as other pagan

tribes. In Numbers Rabbah there is a lengthy exposition of this text. The rabbis emphasized that King David expelled them. In addition they stated that other biblical figures also expelled the Gibeonites.

Whence is it inferred that the matter was dependent on David? Because it is written, "And Joshua made them (Gibeonites) hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord ... in a place he shall choose" (Joshua 9:27). Said R. Ammu in the name of R. Joshua, son of Levi: What necessity was there after having said, "For the congregation," and for saying "In the place he shall choose?" Only to indicate that Joshua left the matter to the discretion of David. He thought, "Personally I shall neither bring them near nor remove them far, but he who will at a later time build the Chosen House can exercise his discretion. If he sees a sufficient reason for bringing them nigh let him bring them nigh. If for removing them, let him remove them." So when David came and saw that they were cruel he removed them. Ezra also removed them. As it is written, "But the Nethinim dwelt in Ophel" (Nehemiah 11:21).<sup>79</sup>

Even though David's attitude seems conciliatory, he eventually expells them. The midrash states that he who will build the Chosen House should decide what to do with the Gibeonites. The Chosen House obviously refers to the Temple in Jerusalem. Of course the rabbis interpreted that situation to refer to the situation of Ezra. The midrash stated that he expelled them by a reinterpretation of the verse in Nehemiah. The literal meaning of Ophel is fort. However, the rabbis translated it to mean darkness or obscurity. The text proves that Ezra drove them away from the Jewish people. They would no longer pose a threat to the purity of the people. Not only did Ezra protect and preserve the ethnic identity of the Jews from the Babylonian

hosts, but he also fought to maintain Israel's survival from their neighbors in the land of Israel itself.

The next midrash is similar to the preceding one. It is found in Midrash Samuel. In the midrash there is a little difference in the text. David said that God gave three gifts to Israel. They were compassion, humility and acts of loving kindness. And none of these qualities are found in the Gibeonites. Therefore David stood and expelled them. "And the Gibeonites are not from the children of Israel" (II Samuel 21:2). Ezra also expelled them. "And the Nithinim dwell in Ophel." (Nehemiah 11:21).<sup>80</sup> In this midrash the word ophel is changed to mean aphar or dust. They will be destroyed and crushed into dust. But in the Messianic time God will destroy them forever.

The next section will continue to focus attention on Ezra's efforts at preserving the ethnic identity of the people. The following discussion will analyze Ezra's attitude towards intermarriage. In addition there will be a discussion on his attempts to protect Jewish women from gentile men. In his efforts to fight intermarriage, Ezra persevered to maintain the dignity of Jewish women.

The first passage is a haggadah from the Talmud. The Gemara claimed that the prophet Malachi and Mordecai are the same person. Then the Gemara claims that Malachi and Ezra are the same individuals:

It has been taught; R. Joshua b. Korba said; Malachi is the same as Ezra. The sages say that Malachi was his real name. There is good ground for accepting the view

that Malachi was the same as Ezra. For it is written in the prophecy of Malachi, "Judah hath dealt treacherously and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah hath profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loveth and hath married the daughter of a strange God" (Malachi 2:2). And who was it that put away the strange women? Ezra, as it is written, "And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam answered and said unto Ezra; We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women." (Ezra 10:2)<sup>81</sup>

The rabbis take the verse from Malachi out of its context and interpret the first part of the verse to refer to the act of intermarriage. This fits in nicely with the historic events in the book of Ezra in which he discovered that intermarriage had spread throughout the land. The daughter of a strange God is a metaphor within the context of Malachi. But in the context of Ezra, the rabbis focus on the literal meaning. They say it refers to foreign women. The rabbis conclude with the verse from the book of Ezra to prove that he was the one who put a stop to their practices. Once again, Ezra is the symbol of opposition to intermarriage.

With the rabbinic understanding that Malachi is Ezra, Dr. Ginsberg points to a midrash in Genesis Rabbah. The discussion originates from chapter two. "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife so that they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). The discussion deals with the complicated issues involved in marriage to a proselyte woman. The rabbis quote a verse from Malachi which is supposed to prove that God's concern for divorce only applies to a marriage between two Israelites. Throughout

the book of Malachi, the expression "the Lord of Hosts" is used. Whereas here (in reference to divorce), we have the "God of Israel." As it says, "For I hate putting away (divorce) said the Lord, the God of Israel" (Malachi 2:16). It is as though one might say; His name has no bearing on divorce save in the care of Israel alone" (Genesis Rabbah 18:5)<sup>82</sup>

This preceding midrash sets the stage for the midrash which follows in the text. It relates directly to the problem of intermarriage at the time of the return from exile. Even though Ezra's name is not mentioned, the verses from Malachi are intended to refer to Ezra's reaction to intermarriage.

When Nehemiah came up from the land of the Exile, he found that the women's faces were black from the sun, so that (their husband's) had gone and married strange (heathen) wives, while these would go around the altar weeping. Thus Malachi said, "And this you do for a second time!" ... You actually repeat the sin committed at Shittim. You cover the altar of the Lord with tears with weeping and with sighing. (Malachi 2:13). God said, "Who will accept weeping and sighing from them? Having robbed her, oppressed her and deprived her of her beauty, you threw her out! And how do we know that they are forbidden incest like an Israelite? Because it says, "And he shall cleave unto his wife"<sup>83</sup> which implies, but not to his neighbor's wife."

Assuming that Malachi is Ezra, he is reminding the people of their former sin at Shittim. This refers to the book of Numbers when the Israelites were at Shittim and had sexual relations with the women of Moab. They encouraged the Israelite men to make sacrifices to the Moabite God. "While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profane

themselves by whoring with the Moabite women who invited the people to the sacrifice of their God. The people partook of them and worshipped that God" (Numbers 25:12). Ezra castigates his people showing that they have not learned their lesson. By providing verse two of chapter two in Malachi, Ezra indicates a tone of amazement. He gives the impression that the people should have known better. He is angry because they did not learn from history. Ezra uses history to evoke shame from them. Of course God also comments on the heinous sin because the men have hurt so badly the Israelite women. Ezra shows that he is not afraid to face the bad times of his people's past. He acts like he as the conscience of the people.

The third passage is a haggadah from tractate Gitten. The Gemara is commenting on the issue of the rights of men to divorce their wives. This haggadah refers to Ezra directly. The story quotes from the book of Malachi. However, as mentioned earlier, rabbinic literature interprets Malachi to mean Ezra. The haggadah comments on the biblical phrase, "For a hateful one put away" (Malachi 2:16). Even though the haggadah does not directly refer to Ezra, the message of the story relates very well to Ezra's attitude towards the Israelites marrying foreign women.

"For a hateful one put away" (Malachi 2:16). R. Judah said (This means that), if you hate her, you should put her away. R. Johanan says; It means he who sends his wife away is hated. There is really no conflict between the two, since one speaks of the first marriage and the other of the second marriage. As R. Eleazer said, "if a man divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds

tears." As it says, "And this further you do, you cover the altar of the Lord with tears; with weeping and sighing, in so much as he does not regard the offering anymore, neither does he receive it with good will at your hand. Yet you say, Wherefore? Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth against who you have dealt treacherously, though she is the companion and the wife of your covenant." (Malachi 15:14).<sup>84</sup>

The description of the tragedy of divorce between a couple married for the first time could serve as a metaphor to the tragedy of Jewish men forsaking Jewish women and taking foreign women as their wives. Ezra, through the prophecy of Malachi, is trying to appeal to the people's conscience. His attitude is as if he were lamenting the fact that intermarriage is rampant and it is almost too late to stop it. He reminds them that Jewish men and women stood together to enter into the covenant and by intermarrying they are abrogating the holy covenant. One receives the impression that the divorce is not necessarily between a Jewish man and woman, but by taking a foreign woman, whether it is the first marriage or not, is symbolic of breaking a holy commandment.

His fight against intermarriage represents his fight to preserve the ethnic and religious identity of the people. It also reveals that Ezra saw himself as the last link between the people and God. Ezra is the שומר אמונה guardian of the faith. He is willing to take responsibility for preserving the people and their religion. His efforts reveal his great determination not to give up. Instead his character will not allow him to resign to defeat because the

elements of hope and optimism have been an integral part of Ezra's character.

The last section of this chapter will analyze the remaining portion of the "Ten Regulations of Ezra." These regulations all deal with preserving the dignity of the Jewish woman and the Jewish home. The following discussion will reveal Ezra's concern for proper protocol between man and woman. The rules and regulations also suggest the Ezra was very sensitive to the dynamics of and relations between husband and wife. He was equally concerned about maintaining peace in the Jewish home. Ezra knew that the delineation of roles was important to maintaining Jewish survival. His involvement also shows that Ezra was an example of a model sage because of his participation in Torah study as well as in communal duties.

The fourth regulation states that the clothes should be washed on Thursday. The Gemara explains that the reason is so that "the Sabbath may be duly honoured."<sup>85</sup> This statement indicates Ezra's conviction, as well as the rabbis' conviction, that the women were to take care of the domestic chores. But the intention is that Ezra believed that the woman was responsible for preparing the family and the house itself for the Sabbath.

The fifth regulation requires that the man should eat garlic on Fridays. The Gemara explains, "Because of the Onah." As it is written, "That brings forth its fruit in its season." (Psalm 1:3). R. Judah or as others say R.

Nahman, or as still others say R. Kahana or R. Johanan stated that this refers to him who performs his marital duty every Friday night."<sup>86</sup> Five things were said about garlic: it satiates, it keeps the body warm, it brightens the face, it increases semen, and it kills parasites in the bowels. Some say that it fosters love and removes jealousy.<sup>87</sup>

Ezra is referring to the obligation that the man has toward his wife. One of these obligations is sex. Here Ezra is concerned about and sensitive to the need for couples to enjoy each other. The rabbis give Ezra credit for being in touch with matters of shalom bayit. He is not only a scholar but is involved in applying the ethical teachings of Judaism into the lives of the people.

The seventh regulation of Ezra is that women are required to wear a *sinnar*. It is a garment, possibly a veil. The origin of the word is not known. The Gemara claims that women must wear it out of modesty."<sup>88</sup> The general view that women should not be promiscuous because many men would be attracted to them is the cause for wearing the garment. It serves to protect the dignity of the woman.

The eighth regulation is that a woman must comb her hair before performing immersion in a mikveh. The Gemara explains the rationale:

But this is derived from the Pentateuch. For it was taught, "And he shall bathe (*eth besaro*) his flesh in water" (Lev. 14:19). This implies that there should be nothing intervening between the body and the water. "*Eth besaro* or his flesh:" *eth* includes whatever is attached to his flesh, i.e. the hair. Why then had this to be ordained by Ezra? It may, however, be said that

as far as the Pentateuch goes it would only have to be necessary to see that the hair should not be knotted or that nothing dirty should be there which might intervene.<sup>89</sup> Whereas Ezra came and ordained actual combing.

This haggadah not only emphasizes Ezra's concern that women perform the prescribed rituals properly, but it also highlights Ezra's attention on matters of purity. In previous portions of the chapter, the issue of purity has arisen in response to the purity of Jews coming up to Jerusalem. In addition it came up in relation to Ezra's performance of the rites of the Red Heifer. In the present story, Ezra pays attention to great detail by making sure not only that the woman bathes herself, but also combs her hair so that it would be absolutely certain that she completed the ritual properly.

The ninth regulation is that peddlers selling spicery be allowed to travel about the towns. The Gemara explains that this regulation is "for the purpose of providing toilet articles for the women so that they should not be repulsive in the eyes of their husbands."<sup>90</sup> The explanation shows Ezra's ability to balance the necessity for modesty in public versus the necessity of the natural inclination for women and men to be attractive to each other.

There is another haggadah on this subject which shows Ezra's personal feelings that students of Torah who sell these products should receive preferential treatment: R. Nahman b. Isaac said; R. Huna the son of R. Joshua

also agrees that spice sellers cannot prevent one another from going to any given town because, as a Master has stated, Ezra made a rule for Israel that spice sellers should be able to obtain finery. This means they can go from house to house but cannot settle there except if they are students. This is according to Rabbah" 91

Not only does the haggadah suggest that Ezra was flexible by allowing spice sellers to go from home to home, but it also gives an insight into Ezra's bias for the students of the Torah. The spice sellers were probably mistrusted because of the kind of materials they sold and consequently the kind of contact and conversation that they might have with the women. Therefore, no one wanted them to settle in a town, or else there might be affairs. Ezra understands the problem but draws an exception to the rule. He knows that a student of Torah who sells spices must still be an honourable person. This viewpoint relates back to an earlier section which stated that Torah-study was the highest value in Jewish life. There could be no question that a student of Torah would ever be in suspicion because he follows the teachings of the Torah.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), 4:355.

<sup>2</sup>B.T. Sota 4b.

<sup>3</sup>Ephraim Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and Their Beliefs (Jerusalem: Magnes Press The Hebrew University, 1979), .

<sup>4</sup>B.T. Sota 4b

<sup>5</sup>B.T. Sukkah 20a.

<sup>6</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 5:5.

<sup>7</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 5:4.

<sup>8</sup>B.T. Baba Kamma 82a.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid

<sup>11</sup>Midrash Tanaim 43, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> B.T. Mishnah Avot 1:2.

<sup>13</sup>Urbach, p.568.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 559.

<sup>15</sup>Philip Birnbaum, Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979), p. 435.

<sup>16</sup>Urbach, p. 569.

<sup>17</sup>Genesis Rabbah 38:8.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>B.T. Sanhedrin 21b.

- <sup>20</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup>B.T. Babba Bathra 15a.
- <sup>23</sup>B.T. Sanhedrin 93b.
- <sup>24</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 4:4
- <sup>25</sup>Birnbaum, p. 608.
- <sup>26</sup>Urbach, p. 124.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup>B.T. Yoma 39b.
- <sup>29</sup>Urbach, p. 608.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid, p. 133.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid, p. 134.
- <sup>32</sup>B.T. Yoma 68b.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid, 69b.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup>J.T. Megillah 7,11c.
- <sup>36</sup>B.T. Sanhedrin 21b-22g.
- <sup>37</sup>Numbers 19:11-13.
- <sup>38</sup>Numbers 19:7-10.
- <sup>39</sup>B.T. Mishnah Parah 3:53.
- <sup>40</sup>Birnbaum, p. 41.
- <sup>41</sup>B.T. Mishnah Parah 2:1.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid 3:5.
- <sup>43</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 1:4.
- <sup>44</sup>Esther Rabbah 1:2.
- <sup>45</sup>B.T. Baba Mesia 85a.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>47</sup>B.T. Mishrah Avot 2:12.
- <sup>48</sup>Urbach, p. 638
- <sup>49</sup>B.T. Berakhoth 27b.
- <sup>50</sup>B.T. Menahoth 53a.
- <sup>51</sup>B.T. Song of Songs Rabbah 5:5.
- <sup>52</sup>B.T. Megillah 16b.
- <sup>53</sup>Urbach, p. 472.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid, p. 476.
- <sup>55</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 4:4.
- <sup>56</sup>Urbach, p. 604.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid, p. 605.
- <sup>58</sup>B.T. Gittin 59a.
- <sup>59</sup>Urbach, p. 605.
- <sup>60</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup>Ibid, p. 606.
- <sup>62</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup>B.T. Gittin 36a.
- <sup>65</sup>B.T. Soncino 4:36a.
- <sup>66</sup>B.T. Gittin, 36b.
- <sup>67</sup>B.T. Moed Katan, 16a.
- <sup>68</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup>B.T. Yebamot 86b.
- <sup>70</sup>Urbach, p. 603.
- <sup>71</sup>Ibid, p. 604.
- <sup>72</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 8:5

- <sup>73</sup>B.T. Kiddushin 69b.  
<sup>74</sup>Ibid, p. 350.  
<sup>75</sup>Ibid, 69b.  
<sup>76</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>77</sup>Ma'aseh Daniel, p. 120-121.  
<sup>78</sup>Aggadah Berashit.  
<sup>79</sup>Numbers Rabbah 8:4.  
<sup>80</sup>Midrash Samuel.  
<sup>81</sup>B.T. Kiddushin 69b.  
<sup>82</sup>Genesis Rabbah 18:5.  
<sup>83</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>84</sup>B.T. Gittin 90b.  
<sup>85</sup>B.T. Baba Kamma 82a.  
<sup>86</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>87</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>88</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>89</sup>Ibid, a.-b.  
<sup>90</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>91</sup>B.T. Baba Bathra 22a.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### TRANSLATION OF MIDRASH EZRA

#### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### Introduction

The book Midrash Daniel and Ezra was written by Rabbi Samuel b. Rabbi Nissim. The manuscript which was used as the basis for this scientific edition comes from Vatican Hebrew manuscript 97. This manuscript included Rabbi Samuel's commentary on the book of Chronicles. It is believed that Rabbi Samuel wrote commentaries on all of the books of the Bible. Apparently, he prefaced the title of his commentary with the word "Midrash."

Rabbi Solomon Buber believed that Rabbi Samuel b. Rabbi Nissim lived in Aleppo, Syria. He bases this conclusion upon historical information. Rabbi Judah Alcharizi traveled to Aleppo and met Rabbi Samuel. In his diary, "The Golden Tongue," his letters and his book, חכמת מלכות, he gives a great deal of praise to Rabbi Samuel as well as his father R. Nissim. Alcharizi visited the Middle East in the year 1148. He reports that Rabbi Nissim was head of a Yeshivah in Aleppo. In addition, he also mentioned that

Rabbi Samuel had two sons. Alcharizi nicknamed Rabbi Samuel as the "poet and scribe." The section on Midrash Ezra consists of ten chapters which correspond to the ten chapter in the Bible. The midrash is exegetical. Rabbi Samuel analyzed each verse and picks out a word or phrase which may be problematic from a literary or grammatical perspective. He draws from the vast sources of aggadah in the Talmud as well as the midrashic sources. The writer has translated chapters seven through ten. However due to the time restrictions, the writer has included only chapter seven in the thesis.

#### Chapter Seven

**Verse 5:** "son of Abishua son of Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron the chief priest, -- This is Ezra."

commentary: "son of Abishua son of Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron the chief priest." Why is it necessary to say all of these names which conclude with; "son of Aaron the chief priest?" The reason is that; (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:4), if Aaron were alive in Ezra's generation, then Ezra would still have been greater than Aaron."

**Verse 6:** "That Ezra come up from Babylon, a scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given whose request the king had granted in its entirety, thanks to the benevolence of the Lord toward him."

commentary: "Ezra came up from Babylon (B.T. Kiddushin 69b) "Ten genealogical classes went up from Babylon (after the first exile): Priests, Levites,

Israelites, Halalim, Proselytes, Freedmen, Bastards, Temple servants, Shethuki and Asubhei." R. Eleazar said that Ezra did not go up to the Land of Israel until he made the people like pure sifted flour; then he went up."

commentary: "A scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses" Ezra was zealous and diligent in his work. He was not lazy. As is written; (Proverbs 22.9) "See, a man skilled in his work." This means that he was exact and zealous in his work.

**Verse 9:** "On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was started, and on the first day of the fifth month he arrived in Jerusalem, thanks to the benevolent care of his God for him."

commentary: "the journey up from Babylon was started" The first day of the first month was the beginning of their departure from Babylon. Just as the word "יָסֵד" foundation" refers to the building of the Temple; therefore, any matter which is the beginning of another matter is called "יָסֵד" foundation. Scripture states; (Ezra 3:10), "And the builders established the foundation of the Temple of the Lord, priests in their vestments with trumpets, and Levites sons of Asaph with cymbals were stationed to give praise to the Lord, as King David of Israel had ordained." This means that the Builders began to build the Temple of the Lord.

**Verse 10:** "For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the Lord so as to observe it and to teach laws

and rules to Israel."

commentary: "For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the Lord. (B.T. Sandedrin 21b.) R. Hisda said that Mar R. Ukbah said; "Originally the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew characters and in the sacred (Hebrew) language. In the times of Ezra the Torah was given in Ashsurith script and Aramaic language. Finally, the selected for Israel the Ashshurith script and Hebrew language. They left the Aramaic language and Hebrew characters for the hedyototh. Who are meant by the Hedyototh? R. Hisda answered "The Cutheans." And what is meant by Hebrew character? R. Hisda said: "The libuna'ah script." It has been taught like R. Hisda; R. Jose said; "Had Moses not preceeded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. Of Moses it is written; (Exodus 19:3), Moses went up to the mountain of God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said; "Speak thus to the house of Jacob and tell this to the sons of Israel. "And concerning Ezra, Scripture says; (Ezra 7:6) "That (he) Ezra went up from Babylon." As the going up of the former (Moses) refers to receiving the Law, so too does the going up of the latter (Ezra) refers to receiving the Law. Concerning Moses, it is written; (Deut 4:14), "And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments." Concerning Ezra, it is written; (Ezra 7:10), "For Ezra had prepared his heart to expound the Law of the Lord (his God) to do it and to teach Israel statutes and

judgments." And even though the Torah was not given through him, its writing was changed through him. As it is written; (Ezra 4:7), "And the writing of the letter was written in the Aramaic characters and interpreted into the Aramaic languages." And it is written; (Daniel 5:8), "And they could not read the writing nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof." This teaches that on the day the Torah was given, it was written; (Deut. 17:18), "And he shall write the copy of this law." Therefore, the writing was destined to be changed.

Why was it called Ashshurith? Because it came with them from Assyria. It has been taught that Rabbi said; "The Torah was given to Israel in Ashshurith. When they sinned, it was broken into pieces. And when they returned in repentance, the Ashshurith script was returned to them. As it is said; (Zecharia 9:12), "Turn to the stronghold, prisoners of hope; even today do I declare that I will bring back the Mishnah to you." Why then was it named Ashshurith? Because its script was upright.

(Sandedrin 22a.), "R. Simeon b. Eleazar in the name of R. Eleazar b. Parta who spoke on the authority of R. Eleazer of Modim. This writing (of the law) was never changed. As it is said; (Exodus 27:10), "The waws (hooks) of the pillars shall be of silver." As the word "pillars" has not changed, neither had the word "wawim" (hooks) changed. The entire script has not changed. Scripture says; (Esther 8:9), "So the King's scribes were summoned at

that time, on the twenty-third day of the third month, that is, the month of Sivan; and letters were written, at Mordecai's dictation, to the Jews and to the satraps, the governors and the officials of the 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia: to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language." Just as their language had not changed, neither has their script changed.

If this is so, then why was this script named Ashshurith? The reason is that it is upright in its letters. The following dictum burthier clarifies the meaning. "R. Simeon b. Eleazar said; "This writing (of the law) was never changed." What is the meaning of the phrase; (Daniel 5:8), "And they could not read the writing nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof." Rav answered that it was written; (Avot de Rabbi Nathan 13 2), "Our rabbis taught; "Make your study fixed just as if a man had heard a lesson from a sage in the House of Study. Rather than making your study-time arbitrarily, organize a fixed time for study. That which a man learns, he should practice. Afterwards when he has learned it, then he can teach it to others. As it is said; (Deut. 5:1), "Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: Listen, O Israel, to the statutes and the Laws which I proclaim in your presence today. Learn them and be careful to observe them." After they learn them, it is stated; (Deut. 11:13) "Teach them to your children and speak of them indoors and out of doors,

when you lie down and when you rise." Therefore, concerning Ezra Scripture says; (Ezra 7:10), "For Ezra prepared his heart to expound the Teaching of the Lord and to do it." Afterwards Ezra would teach it.

**Verse 11:** "This a copy of the royal letter which King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra the priest and scribe, a scribe versed in questions concerning the commandments and the statutes of the Lord which he laid upon Israel."

commentary: "This is a copy of the royal letter"

There is a similar meaning in the following verse; (Deut. 17:18), "When he has ascended the throne of the kingdom, he shall make a copy of this law in a book at the dictation of the levitical priests." Therefore, the phrase "a copy of this law" refers to "copy of the royal letter." Perhaps, the word " פרשגן " is related to the words " משנה שנה שנית " and its meaning is the actual text of the letter.

commentary: "To Ezra the priest and scribe"

Just as he used to count the words of the Torah, he would also count the words of the sages (J.T. Shekalim 5:1; B.T. Shekalim 13a.).

**Verse 12:** "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest and scribe learned in the law of God of heaven."

commentary: "Scholar in the law of God of heaven and so forth."

The word " גמיר " (learned) is translated by analogy with the Targum to refer to the following phrase: (Exodus 28:3), "And you shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue."

This is as if to say that he wrote the Teaching of God and his statutes from beginning to end. Scripture states; (Deut. 31:24), "When Moses had finished writing down these laws in a book from beginning to end." This is to say, the Torah in its entirety including this poem, from beginning to end. Similarly, Scripture states; (Psalm 77:9) "Has his faithfulness disappeared forever? Will his promise be unfulfilled for all time." Scripture states; (Psalm 57:3), "I will call to God Most High, to God who is good to me." In Psalm 77, the phrase; "Will his promise be unfulfilled forever, ( גַּמַּר אֹמֵר לְדוֹר וָדוֹר ), has the same meaning as the phrase; "to a God who is good to me," ( לֹאֵל גּוֹמֵר עָלַי ), in Psalm 57. There are those who say that the meaning of the word comes from that which the rabbis said: (B.T. Gitten 76a.) "And we learn from it or "I did not learn (B.T. Kiddushin 70b). The intention is that he wrote the Torah of the Lord and taught it to Israel. Similarly, Scripture states; (Ezra 7:10) "For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the Lord so as to observe it and to teach laws and rules to Israel."

What is the meaning of the word גַּמַּר ? It is possible that it means "now" or כַּעֲנַת. Scripture states: (Genesis 3:22), "And God said, 'This man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, what if he now reaches out his hand and takes fruit from the tree of life also, and eats it and lives forever.'" The Hebrew word עַתָּה "now" may have the same meaning as כַּעֲנַת.

The hebrew letter "נ" is an addition. It is as if it were used in the following way; (Ezra 7:3), "And now I hereby issue an order."

And there are those that say that the king gave two letters to Ezra. Concerning the first one, it is written; (Ezra 7:3), "I hereby issue an order that anyone in my kingdom who is of the people of Israel and its priests and Levites who feels impelled to go to Jerusalem may go with you." The other letter was supposed to accompany Israel when they would get to the province Beyond the River.

Concerning the second one, it is written; (Ezra 7:21), "I, king Artaxerxes, for my part hereby issue an order to all the treasurers in the province of Beyond the River that whatever request Ezra the priest, scholar in the law of God of Heaven makes of you is to be fulfilled with dispatch."

The order of the biblical text is that king Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest and learned scribe in the law of the Lord, God of the Heaven, the actual manuscript. He gave a copy of the letter to all the treasurers. This copy consisted of verses twelve through twenty-four.

**Verse 14:** "For you are commissioned by the king and his seven advisors to regulate Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care."

commentary: "seven advisors"

The phrase "seven advisors" is used in the same way in the targum to the following verse; (Job 3:14), "With the world's kings and counselors who rebuild ruins for themselves." The

phrase, "the world's counselors" means the same thing as counselor in the context of the verse from Ezra. It is the intention to say that the king's ministers were his counselors. And the same meaning occurs elsewhere in scripture states; (Daniel 6:8), "All the counselors of the kingdom, the prefects, satraps, companions and governors are in agreement that a royal ban should be issued under sanction of an oath that whoever shall address a petition to any god or man besides you, O King, during the next thirty days shall be thrown into the lion's den."

commentary: "To regulate over Judah"

This means to spy out and to search out the land for their well-being and the well-being of their nation.

**verse 18:** "And whatever you wish to do with the leftover silver and gold you and your kinsmen may do, in accord with the will of your God."

commentary: "the will of your God."

"His wish or desire." Similarly, it is stated in Scripture; (Daniel 5:17), "Then Daniel said in reply to the king, You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your presents to others, But I will read the writing for the king and make its meaning known to him." The expression coincides with the following verse from Scriptures; (Leviticus 1:4), "He shall lay his hand on the head of the victim and it will be accepted by the Lord to make an expiation for him." The hebrew phrase וְנִרְצָה לוֹ "and it was accepted by him" means the same as the Aramaic phrase וְנִתְרַעֵי לֵה.

**verse 21:** "I, king Artaxerxes, for my part, hereby issue an order to all the treasurers in the province of Beyond the River that whatever request Ezra the priest, scholar in the law of the God of Heaven makes of you is to be fulfilled with dispatch.

commentary: "treasurers"

These are the treasurers appointed to the treasuries containing silver and gold which belong to the king. Our rabbis taught; (B.T. Peahl chap.2 Mishnah 8), "If robbers reaped half and the owner the other half, he gives pe'ah from what he has reaped. If he reaped half and sold the other half, then the purchaser must give Pe'ah for the whole. If he reaped half and dedicated the other half, then he who redeems it from the treasurer must give Pe'ah for the whole. Similarly, we find the verse (Ezra 1:8), "These king Cyrus of Persia released through the office of Mithredath the treasurer, who gave an inventory of them to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah."

**Verse 22:** "Up to the sum of one hundred talents of silver, on hundred kor of wheat, one hundred bath of oil, and salt without limit."

commentary: "up to 100 talents of silver."

The discussion in tractate Rosh Hashanah clarifies the interpretation of the verse (B.T. Rosh Hashanah 4a.), "R. Abbahu replied Cyrus was a worthy king (in his early years), but in his later years he became bitter. Based on the

phrase; "up to 100 talents of silver," where do we prove the fact that he became bitter? Originally, he definitely did not stipulate a specific sum. As it is written; (Ezra 1:4), and all who stay behind, wherever he may be living, let the people of his place assist him with silver, gold, goods and livestock, beside the freewill offering to the House of God that is in Jerusalem." And it was given from the House of the King without stipulation. Now it is given with stipulations.

commentary: "100 bath of oil"

The bath oil and the measure of corn are on standard. As it is written; (Ezedkiel 45:11), "There shall be one standard of each, taking each as the tenth of a homer and homer shall have its fixed standard." However, the ephah is a dry measure and the bath oil is a liquid measure. An example of a liquid measure would be oil and wine. Similarly, concerning these measurers, they are all still divided into the quantity of the tenth of a homer.

**Verse 24:** "We further advise you that it is not permissible to impose tribute, poll tax or land tax on any priest, Levite, singer, gatekeeper, temple servant or other servant of this House of God."

commentary: "singer and gatekeeper."

They are the musicians and the gatekeepers. (Psalm 9:11) "Sing a hymn to the Lord who reigns in Zion, declare his deeds among the people." It is also possible that the meaning may be inferred from the following verse; (Daniel

3:5), "When you hear the sound of the horn pipe, zither, lyre, psaltery bagpipe and all other types of instruments, to fall down and worship the statue of gold the King Nebuchadnezzar has set up." This refers to those who perform with musical instruments.

commentary: "It is not permissible to impose tribute, poll or land tax."

The rabbis said; (B.T. Nedarim 62b), "Raba said; A rabbinical scholar may declare I will not pay poll tax. As it is written; (Ezra 7:24), "It shall be unlawful to impose tribute, (produce tax) custom or toll upon them." R. Judah said; "Mindah" is the king's portion of the crops. "Belo" is a capitation tax. Halak is arnona (produce tax).

**Verse 26:** "Let anyone who does not obey the law of your God, and the law of the king be punished with dispatch, whether by death, corporal punishment confiscation of possessions or imprisonment."

commentary: "whether by death, corporal punishment" Cyrus gave Ezra permission to execute and to punish anyone who violate the laws. For example, he who deserves the punishment of death, shall die. In addition, if one deserves corporal punishment then he shall be punished. If one deserves a large fine, then he shall be fined. If one deserves to be imprisoned, then he shall be incarcerated.

The meaning of the word וְשֹׁרֵשׁ corporal punishment will be clarified in the following phrase from Scripture; (Psalms 52:7), "So God will tear you down for good, will

break you and pluck you from your tent and root  
 ( שורשך ), you out of the land of the living."  
 Furthermore, our rabbis taught; (B.T. Moed Katan 16a.),  
 "Where do we derive that we can fether, arrest and prosecute  
 them (criminals)? As it is written; (Ezra 7:26), "Let  
 judgment be exacted with diligence whether it be unto death,  
 or to uprooting or to confiscation of property or to  
 imprisonment." What is meant by uprooting? Adda Mari,  
 reporting Nehemiah b. Baruch, who said in the name of R.  
 Hiyya b. Aden, who had it from R. Judah, it means the  
 hardafah. What is denoted by hardafah? Said Rab Judah son  
 of R. Samuel b. Shelath in the name of Rab: It means that  
 they declare him separated immediately. Then (if he still  
 persists), they repeat (in the same declaration), after  
 thirty days and finally they pronounce the herem on him  
 after sixty days. Rav Huna b. Hanninah, thus said R. Hisa;  
 They first warn him on Monday and then on Thursday and again  
 on the Monday. This rule applies if he ignores a monetary  
 judgment. But in a case of obstinate resistance to the  
 authorities, the ban is imposed immediately."

**Verse 27:** "Blessed is the Lord God of our Fathers, who put  
 it into the mind of the king to glorify the House of the  
 Lord in Jerusalem."

commentary: to glorify the House of the Lord"  
 Similarly it is stated in Scripture; (Isaiah 44:23), "Shout  
 in triumph, you heavens, for it is the Lord's doing; cry out  
 for joy, you lowest depths of the earth, break into songs of

triumph, you mountain, you forest and all your trees; for the Lord has redeemed Jacob and Israel shall be glorified." The meaning denotes praise, honor and might.

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