

Ezra

The Babylonian Empire conquered the Kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C.E. Many Judeans, especially upper-class scribes, priests and, of course, royalty, were exiled to Mesopotamia. Less than fifty years later, the Babylonians themselves were conquered by the Persians. Then descendents of these Judean exiles began to slowly make their way back to Jerusalem. They rebuilt their villages and their temple, but restoring the city and its economy took a very long time.



Sometime in the next century (historians give dates ranging from 450 to 390 B.C.E.), the Persian king sent Ezra ben Seriah to appoint judges in the province where Judea lay.

Ezra, besides being a Persian official, was also a Jewish priest and “a scribe skilled in the law (torah) of Moses” who “had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:6, 10). This he did in an elaborate ceremony in Jerusalem reported in Nehemiah 8. The Judeans gathered together to see Ezra display the Torah scroll and read from it. Assistants (Levites) interpreted the meaning of the passages to the people. They then celebrated the Festival of Booths (*Sukkot*) for seven days, as they continued to hear the Torah and study its instructions.

To later Jews and Christians and by the standards of the Torah itself (Deut 6:1-9; 31:9-13), this description of Ezra and his actions exemplifies what a rabbi (a Jewish religious leader) should be and do. He leads the people to read and study the Torah, and to observe the laws of God that it contains.

It is surprising, therefore, to observe that Ezra is almost the *first* person in the Bible to be shown doing so. From the time that Moses and Joshua died until this point, for a period of eight hundred or more years, there are almost no references to this kind of behavior. One famous exception, the law book and resulting religious reform of King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23) seems to have had no lasting impact. It is only in the time of Ezra and afterwards that the Torah began to function regularly as scripture.

Note that, according to Nehemiah 8, Ezra ritualized all three dimensions of scripture. He displayed the physical scroll to the people, who rose to their feet at the sight and then

prostrated themselves (iconic dimension—vv. 8-9). He read it aloud on that day and on each day of the festival (performative dimension—vv. 3, 17). And the Levites interpreted its meaning to the people, while the leaders studied it for guidance (semantic dimensions—vv. 7-8, 13). Here we find already the three-dimensional ritualization of a text that distinguishes the function of later scriptures from secular texts. From the time of Ezra on, this became typical of how Torah was treated, but there is no sign that was the case much before this time. It is only from the time of Ezra on (from the early Second Temple period or Persian period) that the Torah functioned as scripture.

(James W. Watts © 2014)