The Second Temple: Reformation Period

ZARATHUSTRA’S CONTRIBUTIONS to religion not only found acceptance during his lifetime, but they have endured for three millennia. Just 500 years after Zarathustra’s ministry, Cyrus II the Great (559-530 BCE) led the Achaemenid (Persian) dynasty as a devout follower of Zarathustra and of his Zoroastrian religion. At the same time, Cyrus behaved generously toward the religious beliefs of the peoples whom he conquered. For example, the Babylonians were allowed to restore the worship of their god, Marduk. And the Hebrews, who earlier had been exiled by the Babylonians, were granted safe return to their Judean homeland and authorized to rebuild their Temple to YHWH in Jerusalem. Moreover, Cyrus explicitly approved the reinstitution of the Hebraic “ancestral laws.”

However, there was one fundamental problem associated with the Hebraic restoration. The Hebrews themselves disagreed on the nature and expression of their ancestral laws. On one hand, there was the ancestral tradition, held by one Hebraic priesthood, of the unconditional Abrahamic oath pledging that YHWH, as the Chosen One, would come to Zion as the anthropomorphic God and compassionately dwell with his people. This unique tradition assumed that the Hebrews would be grateful witnesses to their promised blessing. On the other hand, another Hebraic priesthood maintained the ancestral tradition of the Mosaic covenant, which called for the full obedience of the Hebrews to all of YHWH’s commandments in order to assure their status as the Chosen People. To be successful, the restoration of Judaism required a resolution of this 500-year-old contradiction. In order to
understand this paradox, it is necessary to review the early religious history of the Hebrews.

The religious leadership of Israel was constituted soon after their Exodus from Egypt and during their wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. The Zadokite priesthood was first led by Aaron, who was probably a brother-in-law (rather than brother) of Moses and a member of Moses’ wife’s Midianite-Kenite family. The Levitical priesthood was initially led by Moses himself.

When Moses was meeting with YHWH on the summit of Mount Sinai, Aaron was at the foot of the mountain, attempting to institute calf-worship (Exodus 32:1-6). Together with his family, Aaron was initially responsible for the furnishings of the outer court and Holy Place of the wilderness Tabernacle. Aaron’s family accompanied Caleb and this Tabernacle when the southern tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin entered the Promised Land from the south and occupied Judah, with their headquarters at Hebron, where Abraham had originally settled (Genesis 13:18; Judges 1:20). Here Aaron’s descendant priests — the Zadokites — maintained the wilderness Tabernacle and its services. The Zadokite priesthood became dedicated to the unconditional Abrahamic covenant and to YHWH as the anthropomorphic (human), terrestrial God who would ultimately dwell in Zion.²

Meanwhile, the Levitical family of Moses accompanied Joshua into the Promised Land from the east, across the Jordan River, and occupied the central and northern regions of Israel with the remaining tribes. Joshua established Moses’ tent, with the Ark of the Covenant, at Shiloh under the ministry of the Levitical priests (Joshua 18:1). The Levitical priesthood was dedicated to the conditional Mosaic covenant and to YHWH as the transcendent, celestial God who dwelt in the ethereal realm of heaven.³

The initial union of the diverse Zadokite and Levitical priesthoods occurred during the reign of King David. After David was anointed king of Israel and soon thereafter captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites, he brought Zadok from Hebron northward to Jerusalem to minister in the Tabernacle. At the same time, David summoned Abiathar, the sole surviving Levitical priest, southward to Jerusalem to minister with Zadok in the Tabernacle. Under David the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Tabernacle, and the Zadokite and Levitical priesthoods were thus united in the worship and service of the One God, YHWH. However, upon David’s death Solomon banished Abiathar to Anathoth because he had not endorsed Solomon’s kingship. For the next 500 years the Zadokite and Levitical priests were geographically separated and religiously divided.

This tragic division was never fully surmounted. On one hand, as previously noted, the Levitical priests believed that the Tabernacle and later Temple represented the Mosaic Law. This “covenantal oath” required obedience by

---

The Zadokites believed that the Tabernacle and subsequent Temple
the people as the condition for fulfillment of the Promise. On the other hand, the Zadokites believed that the Tabernacle and subsequent Temple represented the presence of YHWH and his irrevocable, covenantal oath to become human and to bring mankind into the Chosen Paradise. This was a profoundly significant truth that had never before been expressed. Yet the Zadokites failed to properly represent the attendant responsibilities of the people to be authentic witnesses to YHWH. For this reason the First Temple period was strewn with apostasy, immorality and devious departures from the worship of YHWH.

At the beginning of the First Temple period, Israel was rapidly becoming the proverbial Garden of Eden. It also was becoming the crossroads of the known world. Tied to the three continents of Africa, Europe and Asia, Israel was linked to the world by its strategic location bordering the Mediterranean Sea and by two global trade routes. These routes were the Via Maris on the coast and the King’s Highway that followed the Rift Valley northward from the Red Sea and through the Dead Sea and Jordan River Valleys. Then, because of apostasy, the land became desolate. The Northern Tribes were violently removed by Assyria (ca. 720 BCE), and the Southern Tribes were exiled by Babylonia (597/586 BCE).

Years later, Cyrus II the Great of Persia initiated the first efforts to restore Israel under Sheshbazzar (ca. 539 BCE). Cyrus’ successor, Darius I (ca. 522-486 BCE), supported the restoration under Zerubbabel and the Zadokite priest, Joshua (520 BCE). However, these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Not only did the Zadokite priestly leadership fail to gain the support of the people, but they also excluded the role of the Levitical priesthood. In this situation, both Jerusalem and the Second Temple were virtually abandoned, and the remnant people lived in poverty, obscurity and suffering. Moreover, there was extensive intermarriage with foreign wives, which disrupted the traditional matrilineal descent of the Hebrews. Meanwhile, the Persian Empire was focused on its Greek rivals to the west and north. It was only with the Peace of Callius between Persia and Athens that renewed attention could be given to the vital crossroads of Judea.

Nevertheless, the Jewish exiles in Persia not only survived but prospered. While many remained farmers, others became highly educated and rose to prominent levels in government. For example, Nehemiah was appointed cupbearer to King Artaxerxes I. His duties were to protect the king against all internal threats. He was, in fact, a top intelligence agent. Ezra, who descended from the Zadokite priesthood, was given an appointment as a scribe (sofer), in charge of religious and governmental documents.4

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were very familiar with Zoroastrianism — the official religion of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire. In adopting Zoroastrian
In adopting Zoroastrian concepts, Ezra and Nehemiah began to play critical roles in laying the foundation for the subsequent emergence of world Judaism as well as of Christianity and Islam. The contributions of Ezra and Nehemiah are distinguished in the divided canonical books that bear their names, although few if any references are made by one to the other. Yet their historical contributions were closely linked and must be addressed together.

Post-Exilic Reformations

Profound developments occurred within Judaism after the Exile:

1. Before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, there was the termination of the Davidic kingship and the recognition of the Persian king, Cyrus II, as the terrestrial monarch over Judah. One mystery of this era is the disappearance of Zerubabel, the grandson of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, as well as the disappearance of Zerubabel’s son, Meshullam (1 Chronicles 3:19). Intriguingly, there is emerging evidence that Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-66) was actually drafted by Meshullam himself.\(^5\) Deutero-Isaiah acknowledges the anointed kingship of Cyrus II (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:5) and the servanthood of the Davidic line (e.g., Isaiah 53). Apparently, this implied the abdication of the Davidic throne by Zerubabel and his son, Meshullam, and the acknowledged transfer of the monarchy to Cyrus II, the foreign emperor. The Davidic line was not to be restored until Christ himself appeared.

2. There was the sudden termination of the prophetic offices held for over 300 years by the literary prophets, who largely came from both Zadokite and Levitical family lines.\(^6\) While there has been no direct explanation of why the prophets disappeared, there was a continued expectation that the prophetic office would eventually reappear (see Malachi 4:5, 6).\(^7\)

3. The Zadokite and Levitical priesthoods were reunited in the service of the Second Temple. The Aaronic Zadokites, including Ezra himself, were returned from exile and placed in charge of the Temple and its services. The people were then ordered to support the Temple priests with appropriate tithes and offerings. At the same time, Ezra and Nehemiah reinstituted the priesthood of the Mosaic Levites. This involved unprecedented changes:

Moses — who had long since died and was buried on the summit of Mount Nebo — was elevated to the ethereal realm, where his soul (menog) was declared to be the corporate person who sat on the divine throne beside YHWH.
himself. Implicitly, Moses thus served both as king of Israel and as the ultimate prophet:

Moses commanded us a law, even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. And he was king in Jeshurun [ethereal or “ideal” Israel] . . . And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. — Deuteronomy 33:4, 5; 34:10.

Once they had established the ethereal corporate foundation of the Chosen People, Ezra and Nehemiah proceeded to reconstitute the terrestrial realm of Jerusalem itself. Nehemiah acted to rapidly restore and rebuild Jerusalem at the center of Paradise. The walls, which represented the theocratic power structure, were rebuilt in just 52 days despite opposition from such neighboring groups as the Samaritans and Ammonites. The city of Jerusalem was then repopulated by transferring those who had dispersed to surrounding territories so that they again resided within the sacred confines of the city itself.

Nehemiah then created a library of sacred scrolls under the supervision of a General Assembly. Here the Levitical priests gathered all the sacred writings, redacted (edited and revised) them, began to form them into a canon, and then copied and distributed them to Jews both in Israel and throughout the Diaspora. The Levitical priests were further instructed to teach the Torah (Pentateuch = Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) — Law of Moses — to the people by reading and interpreting it in the synagogues and elsewhere on all appropriate occasions. It was thus that the Zadokites, who conducted the Temple services, and the Levites, who led the Torah instructions, were united in their ministries to the Chosen People.

Under Ezra and Nehemiah, the Hebrews then were admonished to worship just One Supreme God — YHWH. The worship of all other gods and goddesses was excluded. No temples, no altars, no high places to the nature gods (Baal, Moloch, Astarte, etc.) were allowed within the Promised Land. YHWH alone — who had led his people out of bondage and exile and who had repeatedly uttered the covenantal oath, “I will . . . be your God, and ye shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:12) — had a place to dwell and be worshiped. At the same time, YHWH was allowed to have a retinue of archangels and angels — a concept that the Hebrews borrowed from Zarathustra over the opposition of certain Zadokites.

To further restore the Hebrews to God’s favor so that they could again represent and reflect the presence of YHWH to the entire world, Ezra and

---

Ezra and Nehemiah . . . instituted the Mosaic covenant — the Mosaic Law — which called the Chosen People to total obedience to all 613 commandments that were incorporated into what was then termed the “Levitical covenant.”

---

The Second Temple: Reformation Period
Nehemiah reintroduced the covenantal traditions. They acknowledged the prior existence of the Adamic, Noahic and Abrahamic covenantal oaths, which YHWH had uttered and which he promised to fulfill himself. Nevertheless, they instituted the Mosaic covenant — the Mosaic Law — which called the Chosen People to total obedience to all 613 commandments that were incorporated into what was then termed the “Levitical covenant” (Malachi 2:4, 8). This covenant required obedience to the Sabbath, so that the gates of Jerusalem were closed on every seventh day. Further, this covenant demanded the purity of all Israel and hence excluded contact with all unclean animals, plants, blood and disease. Also, this covenant imposed the exclusion of all unbelieving foreigners — including foreign wives, foreign partnerships and foreign invasions. These requirements were strikingly similar to those pronounced by Zarathustra centuries earlier.

In instituting the “new covenant,” Ezra brought the people together in Jerusalem. Over a number of days, he read the text and terms of the covenant to all the people. He probably spoke in Hebrew, with his words translated into Aramaic, the lingua franca of that time. In the aftermath, the priests, the people, the city and the restored walls were all unconditionally dedicated to YHWH.

In conveying their convictions, Ezra and Nehemiah deferred to the authority of the Persian emperors and adopted many fundamental beliefs of Zoroastrianism. They embraced the concepts of an ethereal (menog = soul) and an earthly (getik = embodied) state, an embodied soul, a judgment after death, an embodied afterlife, and a final bliss or oblivion. Also, they adopted a belief in archangels and angels and the concept of a commandable covenant involving appropriate worship and purification throughout linear time. At the same time, however, they excluded the Zoroastrian dualism that claimed there were both good and evil gods. Rather, YHWH himself was considered to be the author of both good and evil:

I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things. — Isaiah 45:7.

Meanwhile, the Hebrews began to link evil to the prosecuting angel, Satan. In this role Satan, like the Zoroastrian evil god, Angra Mainyu, had the support of evil and/or alien human beings and of unclean animals, plants, foods, and substances such as blood. By dedicating everything and everyone within the sacred confines of the newly walled Jerusalem to the worship and service of YHWH, Ezra and Nehemiah determined to resist Satan and all his evil forces. By whole-hearted obedience to the terms of the covenant, the Chosen People would ensure the ethereal state of every soul (menog) throughout intermediate
time. And by excluding everything and everyone who was unclean, impure and apostate, they would help YHWH conquer all evil and ultimately bring Satan and his angels to oblivion. In this context the exercise of violence and warfare was considered appropriate only if the Chosen People were deliberately attacked, invaded and subdued.

### Conclusion

Ezra and Nehemiah accepted the end of the terrestrial Davidic kingship and of the traditional prophetic offices. They instituted a united theocratic power structure composed of both the Zadokite and Levitical priesthoods. And they imposed a strict commandable regime on all the people. In so doing, Ezra and Nehemiah largely adopted the views of Zarathustra. These views ultimately helped lay the foundation for the emergence of world Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even more significantly, they provided much of the framework for the future Christ event. Yet only the millennial appearance of the World Savior (“Saoshyant” in Zoroastrianism), as Jesus Christ, could bring the fulfillment of the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and Levitical covenants. As the human manifestation of YHWH himself, only Jesus Christ could irrevocably and unconditionally conclude the ultimate covenant.

---

### Notes and References

1. With the exception of the documentation relating to Zoroastrianism, the principal source material for this essay was derived from John W. Miller, *The Origins of the Bible: Rethinking Canon History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

2. While the Zadokites were united in their belief in the anthropomorphic God, YHWH, they apparently differed in regard to YHWH’s relationship(s) to humanity. Some “seemed to have believed that God is not concerned with man’s affairs” (see Menahem Mansoor, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. [1997], s.v. “Sadducees”). Others regarded YHWH as a “vengeful, bloodthirsty, and jealous anthropomorphic tribal God of fear” (see Mark Willey, *Zoroastrianism*, at www.geocities.com/Pentagon/6315/religion/zoro.html).

3. To further understand the foundational beliefs of the rival priesthoods of the Zadokites and Levites, it is necessary to examine the renewal of the conflict that later took place between the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Sadducees (Zadokites), for example, “denied the doctrine of the resurrection of the body . . . , denied the immortality of the soul . . . , and rejected the Pharisaic doctrine regarding the existence of angels and ministering spirits . . . ” (Mansoor, “Sadducees”).

4. When Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus II, conquered Egypt (525 BCE), the local priests hailed him as pharaoh. In return, Cambyses appointed the former Egyptian admiral, Udjahorresnet, to be the “chief scribe” (see Lisbeth S. Fried, “Cyrus the Messiah: Why Isaiah Calls a Non-Jewish King of Persia Israel’s Anointed One,” *Bible Review* 19, no. 5 [October 2003]: 24-31, 44). This may well explain why Artaxerxes I appointed Ezra as a scribe.
5. "Amateur Bible scholar Nehemiah Rabban, in a little-known book published in 1971, ventured that the key to Second Isaiah’s identity was to be found in the following passage: ‘Who is blind as meshullam or blind as the Lord’s servant?’ (Isaiah 42:19). The Hebrew word meshullam has traditionally been read as a symbolic nickname (variously translated as ‘perfected,’ ‘submissive,’ ‘covenanted’ or ‘repaid’), but Rabban proposed that it is actually the author’s name. Meshullam appears 23 other times in the Bible — and always as a proper name (not a nickname). One such Meshullam was a prominent man — the son of Zerubbabel, who was heir to the house of David and who served as governor of Jerusalem after the Exile (1 Chronicles 3:19). [See Nehemiah Rabban, Yesha ‘yahu hasheni: nevu ‘ato, ishiyuto ushemo (Jerusalem: Kirath Sepher, 1971).] According to Propp, one of the biblical Meshullams — possibly Zerubbabel’s son — may well be the author of Isaiah chapters 40-66” (William H. C. Propp, “Who Wrote Second Isaiah?” Bible Review 19, no. 5 [October 2003]: 32-36, 46).

6. The literary prophets from the Levitical line were Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Zephaniah and Malachi. The Zadokite prophets included Isaiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Obadiah, Habakkuk and Nahum. Deutero-Isaiah may well have come from Davidic lineage. The lineages of Joel and Jonah are not mentioned. See Miller, Origins of the Bible.

7. In the year 141 BCE a Great Assembly convened to legally confirm Simon the Hasmonean as high priest and prince. “It seems that the Great Assembly had some doubts about investing with the high priesthood a man who was not of the priestly line of which the preceding high priests came. It probably was also uneasy about confirming as secular ruler of the country someone who was not of Davidic origin. It therefore qualified its decisions by the added condition that they were valid until such time ‘when a true prophet will appear,’ presumably to confirm or reject them” (Moses A. Shulvass, The History of the Jewish People, vol. 1, The Antiquity [Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982], p. 79).

8. A later reference to the ethereal status of Moses is found in the writings of the Jewish scholar, Philo of Alexandria. “Following a certain widespread Jewish tradition, Philo includes Moses among those who, like Enoch and Elijah, did not die but were translated to heaven during their lifetime. But ‘when he had to make his pilgrimage from earth to heaven and leave the mortal life to become immortal,’ he did not take up his abode, as did Elijah, among the angels in heaven, nor did he take up his abode, as did Enoch, among the ideas in the intelligible world, but he is among those ‘whom God has advanced even higher, and has enabled them to soar above all species and genera and stationed them beside himself,’ and in proof of this he quotes the verse, ‘But as for thee, stand thou here with Me.’ [Deuteronomy 5:28]” (Harry Austryn Wolfson, Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, vol. 1 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947], pp. 403-404).

9. "Jehoiarib . . ., the first of the 24 priestly divisions that served at the First Temple (1 Chron 24:7). They are not mentioned among the four major priestly families, who returned from exile and were divided into 24 divisions . . . for the purpose of serving at the Second Temple. . . . [Furthermore,] neither the Jehoiarib nor the Jedaijah-Jeshua houses are mentioned among the families who signed the covenant (amanah). It would therefore appear that the Jehoiarib family of the Second Temple period was a branch of the high priestly family of Jedaijah-Jeshua, which returned from exile at the time of Zerubbabel and opposed the activities of Ezra” (Yehoshua M. Grintz, Encyclopaedia Judaica, CD-ROM ed. [1997], s.v. “Jehoiarib”).