

CHAPTER 8

EZRA

Though many priests returned with Joshua and Zerubbabel to Jerusalem, there were those that remained in Babylonia. Most maintained their priestly traditions, for it was possible for Herod to choose one of his high priests from there, cf. p. 112. The best known among them was Ezra. He is never presented to us as a functioning priest, though he may well have so acted, when he returned to Jerusalem. He is seen as "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses" (Ezr. 7:6) and also as "Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven" (7:12). Formerly these two titles were taken as synonymous, the latter being used even as an argument against the authenticity of the decree of Artaxerxes (7:12-26). Today, in spite of their similarity, they are very generally recognized as distinct.

Ezra was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses. Though in Old Testament times the ability to read and write was commoner than was once thought, fluency was rare, due to lack of opportunity. Even a member of a priestly family like Jeremiah, who was probably educated in Jerusalem, used a scribe, Baruch, to write down his prophecies in a scroll (Jer. 36:4, 32). Not merely to keep the nation's records, but to know what was in them, called for high skill, and so the Scribe is a title we frequently meet for one of the highest officials of state under the monarchy, e.g. 2 Sam. 8:17; 20:25, 1 Ki. 4:3, 2 Ki. 18:18 (RSV "secretary", NEB "adjutant-general"). What was necessary in the national realm, must early have been in the religious one as well. We may affirm with certainty that the Babylonian exile made it an absolute necessity that someone should be responsible for the preservation of the people's sacred records.

A scribe like Ezra was not simply responsible for the copying of the Scriptures; in one way that was the least of his responsibilities. He had to guarantee that the copies were accurate, which in turn virtually demanded his knowing the Scriptures, or at least the more important sections, off by heart, so that where the eye or ear was deceived the memory would not be. It was no mere feat of learning by heart. Means were devised by which the memory was aided in obtaining an intelligent grasp of the Scriptures. If the modern view is correct that many of the men of Qumran spent much of their time copying the Scriptures and other religious books, not merely for the community but also for sale outside, it shows what stress was laid on the work being done by suitable men. Such a one was Ezra.

He was also "the scribe of the law of the God of heaven". The Assyrians had left a great deal of political autonomy to their subject races, but they tried to

ensure their political loyalty by a demand that they should include the gods of Assyria in their official worship. The Persians followed the opposite policy. Thanks to a much improved organization and civil service they were able to concede only the minimum of political freedom throughout their empire, but in exchange they gave complete religious freedom. Indeed they even insisted on the proper carrying out of the varying religious systems of the many subject nations, for they believed that this would help to ensure the welfare of the state. Earlier it was noted, cf. p. 23, that they, or at least the civil service department involved, could be concerned even with the religion of the Jews at the frontier-post at Elephantine, near Aswan in the south of Egypt.

It is now generally conceded that there was, to use modern terms, a Ministry for Religious Affairs in the Persian civil service, and that Ezra was one of the highest officials in the Jewish section, if not its head. As was pointed out in ch. 1 "the God of heaven" seems to have been the title the Jews themselves chose for Jehovah, when they had to deal with their polytheistic or Zoroastrian neighbours, and so it was also adopted in official circles. So much was this the case that Nehemiah uses it quite naturally (1 : 4f.; 2 : 4, 20); the absence of the title in the later portions of the book may perhaps be explained by his being in an almost purely Jewish setting. Ezra's official position is a sufficient explanation of the surprisingly wide range of powers entrusted to him.

The Decree of Artaxerxes

If we could date Ezra's return to Jerusalem with certainty, cf. the Additional Note to the previous chapter, it would make it easier to answer some of the problems connected with Artaxerxes' decree (7 : 12-26), but they are all of small importance. In addition our understanding of Ezra's work does not depend on our views of his relationship to Nehemiah.

Unlike Nehemiah, Ezra was apparently given no direct political power, but religiously his authority was limited only by the law of Moses, which he was to administer. It is clear from 7 : 14 that he had a copy of the Law, which had been approved by his "Ministry", where another copy must have been stored up. Indeed, we can assume without reasonable doubt, that it was already being enforced among the Jews of the eastern dispersion, in Babylonia and Persia. The "magistrates and judges" (7 : 25), whom Ezra was to appoint in the satrapy Beyond-the-River, which included Judea, would have authority only over Jews, and that in matters which the Persians considered to be outside their criminal law.

This is the first example of what we today call the "millet" system that has come down to us. It has existed in Palestine and in the Near-East ever since. It meant that every recognized religious community was given the right to regulate its own affairs and enforce its own internal religious laws, so long as they did not conflict with the laws of the sovereign state. In other words, what was implicit in Cyrus' permission for the return to build the Temple had now become explicit. Palestinian Jewry had become a religious body and was no longer a national state. The change of status was marked by the special privileges given to the religious functionaries (7 : 24). From now on the high priest

became the representative and real ruler of Judean Jewry, and this led to his becoming increasingly the head of Jewry at large.

There was nothing out of the ordinary in the state support for the public cultus. We need only remember that according to Josephus the Jews offered sacrifices twice every day for Caesar and the Roman people; from Philo we know these had been paid for by Augustus. Though fighting had broken out earlier, it was the ending of these sacrifices that made the rebellion against Rome official.

Ezra's Return

Whatever may have been the intention of Artaxerxes and the "Ministry for Religious Affairs", it is clear that Ezra had his own interpretation of things. Though the best part of a century had passed since Cyrus' decree and the return under Joshua and Zerubbabel, Ezra clearly regarded himself as the leader of the true return, the fulfiller of Isaiah's prophecies. Perhaps he was encouraged in such an idea by the way the earlier generation had been disappointed in its high hopes.

The beginning of the return is dated as being on the first day of the first month (7:9), which from the sequel seems clearly to have been Nisan, the Passover month. This is significant only if we take it in conjunction with Ezra's obvious determination to make the caravan representative of the whole people.

In the list of those returning (8:1-14) we have a priestly group from each of the main divisions of the priesthood (8:2ab). That Gershom and Daniel represent groups is shown by 8:24. If Ezra is not mentioned in the list, contrast Zerubbabel and Jeshua in 2:2, it may well be because he was under obligation to return to his post in the Persian capital. Then we have a member of the royal family mentioned (8:2c). There follow the names of *twelve* families of commoners. Any last doubt of Ezra's desire that his caravan should represent all Israel should be dispelled by his efforts to ensure the presence of Levites (8:15-20).

The interpretive translation of RSV in v. 13, "Of the sons of Adonikam, those who came later" (RV, "And of the sons of Adonikam, *that were* the last"), is very misleading. It might suggest that they came in a later caravan, which is certainly not intended, or it might be understood as distinguishing them from earlier members of the family who returned under Zerubbabel (2:13). The simplest rendering is that of NEB, "The last were the family of Adonikam . . .", i.e. the list ended with them. It is this list that makes it so hard to place Ezra's return before Nehemiah's first term as governor, for none of those mentioned finds any certain place in the list of those that helped to rebuild the walls (Neh. 3), cf. Additional Note to previous chapter.

It was his conviction that he was in some sense a new Moses that made Ezra ashamed to ask the king for an armed guard (8:22). He could look back not merely to the Exodus itself but also to Isaiah's prophecies of the new Exodus with their record and promise of Divine protection. But the hard facts scared him. There were, apart from an indefinite number of priests, fifteen named and

1511 unnamed laymen; then 38 Levites and 220 temple slaves were added to the total (8:18–20). When we add women and children we have to reckon with some 6,000 persons. The news of such a caravan would spread rapidly far and wide. The report of the treasure carried, quite apart from private property, must have travelled widely and lost nothing in the telling. In addition a journey of something over a hundred days (7:8; 8:31), often over difficult and broken ground, lay before them. It is not surprising then that the glow of enthusiasm that had filled his heart, when he was received by the king to be given his credentials, evaporated a little, when he was by the irrigation canal Ahava.

Hence, though it might not be physically the best preparation for a long trek, he called a fast, as did Esther, when she faced the greatest crisis of her life (Est. 4:16). God saw the humiliation and heard the prayers, and so the company reached its goal without loss or hurt.

Ezra's Activity

There must always remain a question mark over the exact details and timing of Ezra's activities. We must, however, always bear two things in mind. One is that by universal assent among those that can read Hebrew Neh. 7:73c–9:37 belongs to the story of Ezra and not to Nehemiah's Memoirs, however the story is, or is not, to be fitted into the story of Nehemiah.

The other is that Ezra was not simply an influential priest who had decided to return to the land of his fathers and who could take his time in convincing his people to take a serious interest in the Law as he understood it. He was a very high official in the Persian civil service; he had been given plenary powers by the king to act in matters of religion. Since his letter of authority was addressed to the Persian authorities in the satrapy Beyond-the-River (8:36), it is clear that he could have called on them, if there had been any effective opposition to his measures. Since it cannot be proved that he had to return home again, too much stress may not be laid upon this probability, but in any case any reconstruction of the position, which suggests his either ignoring his commission for years or doing what he was not authorized to do, should be adopted only as a last resort.

The purely administrative side of Ezra's task, viz. the appointment of magistrates and judges (7:25), is not mentioned, presumably because the historian assumed that the reader would take it for granted. Yet this was one of the most important parts of Ezra's reform and ensured its success. The two incidents that are recorded are the dissolution of mixed marriages (chs. 9, 10) and the reading of the Law (Neh. 8). When we look at the chronological details, we discover that the latter occurred in the seventh month (Neh. 7:73), the former in the ninth month (Ezr. 10:9), though in neither case is the year mentioned. They will be considered in this order, and we shall see that the logic of events will justify it. In fact the dissolution of the marriages, at least in its more dramatic features, is hardly comprehensible, unless we assume a prior knowledge of the Law of Moses.

To understand the nature and greatness of Ezra's achievement we need to obtain some idea of the part played by the Law of Moses, or Torah, before his

day and above all before the exile. This is not the place to deal once again with the critical attack on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. It is irrelevant to our purpose. In addition the old critical positions tend today to be little more than the termite-eaten shells of old scholarly "orthodoxy". The increasing recognition of the antiquity of the material contained in the so-called sources makes these today little more than relics of man's ingenuity and scholarship.

Few, if any, today will suggest that the ordinary private person under the monarchy possessed his own personal copy of the Pentateuch in whole or part, the more so as the importance of oral transmission and teaching is increasingly being recognized. The Pentateuch itself often stresses the importance of a father's teaching his children, e.g. Gen. 18 : 19, Exod. 12 : 26f.; 13 : 8, 14, Deut. 4 : 9f.; 6 : 7, 20; 11 : 19; 32 : 46, cf. Josh. 4 : 6, 21. It is now generally agreed that such oral transmission, whether at home or in the wider community, formed a most important part of a growing lad's education. There were other ways also in which he learned the traditions of the past.

To the last, until the Jewish commonwealth was destroyed by the Romans, justice remained mainly a local matter, as indeed it is today among those Jews who still recognize the authority of the Rabbinic courts. It was carried out by the more influential citizens in the presence of any who chose to be present. While a greater degree of formality may have developed, down to the fall of the monarchy most court cases will have followed the pattern depicted in Ruth 4. In fact, though Jeremiah was being tried before the highest judges in the land (Jer. 26 : 7-19), the procedure was little, if any, different. Particularly interesting was the right shown there (vv. 17-19) for those who were able to quote precedents to reinforce or challenge the opinion of the judges. We do not find the prophets attacking incorrect law, where the law courts were concerned, but deliberate perversion of evidence and judgement and the force exercised by the rich. There is no reason for supposing that the basic law between man and man was ever in doubt, though its application might be affected by outstanding precedents, and as 1 Sam. 30 : 25 shows, those matters not covered by the Mosaic legislation could be settled by competent authority.

The basic religious law will have been repeated, along with the outstanding stories of God's actions in Israel's history, at the pilgrim feasts. This was expressly demanded in Deut. 31 : 10-13, where "this law" (it is not clear whether Deuteronomy, or the Pentateuch is intended) is to be read during Tabernacles every seventh year. While the modern scholar who believes that this became an annual event may or may not be correct, there can be no doubt that the week-long festivals of Passover and Tabernacles were partly spent in re-hearing at least the more important sections of the law.

What may be called social law, concerning clean and unclean, the permitted and forbidden in marriage, etc., will have been part of every boy's and girl's upbringing, and will have needed no further teaching. Only in matters of sacrifice, ceremonial cleansing, and the like, will the priests very largely have kept the detail of the Law secret. It was for them to decide how things should be done, but there is no evidence of frequent infringements of the ritual. The fate of Hophni and Phineas (1 Sam. 2 : 12-17; 4 : 11) will have served as a long

remembered and salutary warning.

The prophets hardly ever mention sins of ignorance. They attack the deliberate contravention of the moral law, the deliberate perversion of justice, or the carrying out of ritual practices, like sacred prostitution or human sacrifice, which sprang from assimilating the worship of Jehovah to that of other gods. It is clear that they prophesied to people who knew, or ought to have known, what God expected of them.

When Josiah showed such consternation when the book of the law was read to him (2 Ki. 22 : 11), it is clear that it was its condemnation of idolatry that affected him, and it is affirmed by Huldah that this was the real sin (2 Ki. 22 : 17). There is no suggestion that the Law in its main demands was unknown to him.

Throughout the Old Testament period, however, we gain the impression that the average Israelite regarded the Torah of Moses, not as God's gracious instruction, but simply as we regard law. It concerned him only when he broke it, or was tempted to do so. Indeed, since it was not a democratic society, the responsibility for the keeping of much of the law lay on the leaders of the people. Note that no condemnation of the elders of Jezreel for the judicial murder of Naboth is uttered by either Elijah or the Scriptures. They were merely carrying out instructions, and the responsibility lay upon Ahab and Jezebel. Even more striking is the way Jeremiah discounts the behaviour of the ordinary Jerusalem citizen (Jer. 5 : 4). He could not be expected to behave any better than the great and powerful.

Today the religious Jew insists that Torah should be rendered Instruction, not Law. In this he is completely correct, but since God's instruction in detail will always have the force of law, if taken seriously, there has always been the tendency so to regard it. When Paul used the term "law" (*nomos*), he was merely following the usage of the Alexandrian Synagogue enshrined in the LXX. It should, however, be noted that we generally think of law in terms of Common or Statute Law, while this use is probably not to be found in the N.T. at all. Where it is not used of the Mosaic Law, it generally applies to general principles or norms.

Even in the cultus, though the ordinary citizen was expected to play his part, the main stress lay on the king. Just as Bethel could be called "the king's sanctuary" (Amos 7 : 13), so clearly the king was supreme in all but priestly functions in the Jerusalem sanctuary. We need hardly be surprised that there were so many "nonconformists", people who preferred the homely atmosphere and lack of pomp of the local "high place" to the impersonality, glitter and pomp of the official sanctuaries.

What Ezra did was to impress on the people that the Torah of Moses was addressed to each of them individually and not merely to their leaders, and that however many laws it might contain it was primarily instruction. By getting this across he was able to change the whole outlook of the Jewish people and to leave a mark on them that has not been lost to this day.

Ezra and the Torah

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of Ab, i.e. sometime in August. After

three days of rest he handed over all the gifts for the Temple, and those who had come with him settled down in their new homes. The fruit harvest had not been fully brought in yet, so Ezra did not hasten matters, though he will have talked over ways and means at least with those who were sympathetic with his mission.

On the first of Tishri the people gathered in great expectation (Neh. 8 : 1). Even if Ezra had not said much about his purpose, he will have known how to leak as much as he wanted to, and his travelling companions will have made no secret about the purpose of his visit. It was the feast of Trumpets (Num. 29 : 1) and doubtless already the beginning of the civil year, though there is no indication that the later concepts of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) had yet gathered round it. On the other hand the concept held under the monarchy that it might usher in the Day of the Lord had almost certainly not been forgotten. Nothing is said to suggest that Ezra saw anything special in the date, beyond its suitability as a public holiday, for the first of Nisan was still the real New Year's day for him, cf. p. 43 and Exod. 12 : 2.

We must stress, however, that the choice of meeting place was deliberate. It was in the square before the Water Gate. From Neh. 3 : 26 it is clear that this gate was not one of the city gates. It was evidently one that had led from the former royal palace, which had stood south of the Temple. Today its site will lie under the Herodian extension of the temple area. It was near enough to the Temple to allow attendance at the morning sacrifices, but since it was not sacred ground, women, the ritually unclean, and even those who for one reason or another were excluded from the religious community of Israel and its worship could attend.

In the choice of site we have Ezra's deliberate proclamation that the Torah was greater than the Temple and its sacrifices, indeed that the Torah as such was above anything it might contain. Since nothing is said of the thirteen men who supported him (Neh. 8 : 4), the only legitimate assumption is that they were neither priests nor Levites, but laymen, heads of fathers' houses among the people. We might be tempted to reduce the thirteen names, some difficult, cf. the parallel list in 1 Esd. 9 : 43, 44, to twelve and so see in them representatives of "all Israel", were it not that here and in 1 Esd. 9 : 48 we have thirteen Levites to help him (8 : 7). He probably simply accepted the fact that there were thirteen outstanding elders and balanced them with thirteen Levites as his active helpers—Levites, for according to the Law teaching was one of their main functions.

This does not mean that the priests had been ignored, cf. 8 : 13; they had exercised their functions as the first act of worship that day. In addition the very stress on the Torah as a whole would automatically increase their importance. Ezra did not wish to give the impression that his mission was merely a priestly scheme—we must not forget that he was a priest himself.

There is no suggestion that this was a covenant-making ceremony, a presenting of a law to the people which they might accept or refuse. In the first place it was "the law of the God of heaven" (Ezr. 7 : 12), which, as we saw earlier, was accepted by the Persian authorities as binding on the Jews. Then it does not fit

into the considerable line of covenant-renewal ceremonies in Judah's history. However we interpret 9: 38 (Heb. 10: 1), it refers to certain definite commands which the people promised to keep. On any interpretation it refers to something that cannot have taken place until some weeks later, cf. 9: 1 and the exegesis below. Finally, there is no suggestion of acceptance or rejection. The people had recognized it as the Law of Moses in advance (8: 1); it was simply a fact to which they could react with joy or sorrow.

The reading on the second day (8: 13) was confined to the leaders of the people and the Temple personnel, because it was no public holiday; the adding of a second day to the Rosh Hashanah holiday came much later. This reinforces the impression made by the account of the first day's reading. Ezra had about five hours at his disposal (8: 3), and even without translation he could not possibly have read the whole Pentateuch in that time. Indeed, if those scholars were correct who say it was only the "Priestly Code", he would not have been able to cover even that. In fact we are told that Ezra and the Levites read from the scroll (8: 3, 8); in other words he chose such portions as he considered most apposite for the people.

Five hours meant a long session, especially as there were older children present (8: 3). It would have been intolerable, had it not been broken up by translation (v. 8, RV, RSV, NEB margins) and explanation. The translation was, it need hardly be added, into Aramaic. The statement that the people remained in their places suggests that the Levites divided the crowd among them, explaining the difficulties felt in each section, which would undoubtedly vary from group to group.

The immediate reaction of the people was tears, for the most part probably for sins of omission rather than commission. Had it been otherwise, it is hard to conceive of even the most legalistic of men, a charge that can hardly be made against Ezra, demanding feasting because it was a festival, the feast of Trumpets, and the leaving of confession, contrition and restitution until after sundown. It was their joy in the Lord that had moved them to tears, when they realized that they had fallen short of His will. Ezra reassured them that the very fact that they joyed in Him was a guarantee of His safe-keeping. The festal food had, of course, been prepared in any case. The "portions" were to be sent to those who were too poor to have prepared anything special. The Synagogue has always inculcated the privilege of having a guest at the Sabbath or festival table, whether a stranger or a local poor man. Here, however, there were whole families unable to celebrate such a day as was fitting.

Suddenly we find the apparent sorrow transformed into great rejoicing, not by an effort of will, but "because they had understood the words that were declared to them" (v. 12). Surely this does not mean merely that the long hallowed words had been rendered into Aramaic. There is no indication that at this early date a significant portion of the population no longer spoke Hebrew—Neh. 12: 24 seems to be conclusive on this point. It was not even that the Pentateuch, as we may see by comparing its language with that of Chronicles, was, like the English Authorised Version, in a language no longer appreciated by the man in the street. It was quite simply that these old

commandments had suddenly become something addressed to them. They were no longer merely automatically to keep some old traditions or imitate the practices of their neighbours. God had spoken to them and they had understood it.

The first effect of the presentation of the Law was the celebrating of Tabernacles in a new way (8 : 17). We must understand "for from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so" in the light of 2 Ki. 23 : 23, 24, 2 Chr. 30 : 26. There is no suggestion that the feast had not been kept, indeed we know that it had, but now there was a new quality about it. The mention of what were essentially public booths, "in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim" (8 : 16), suggests that they were for the pilgrims from the country. Evidently this was the first time that Tabernacles was centred on Jerusalem alone. There is no doubt that under the monarchy Tabernacles was the great popular festival, but it was celebrated to a great extent at local sanctuaries.

Ezra and Mixed Marriages

Doubtless Ezra and his "magistrates and judges" had many a clash with those whose practices were challenged by the law he was enforcing. One point, however, stood out, and when we study it, we shall see more clearly what Ezra was aiming at.

A couple of months after the reading of the Law, cf. Ezr. 10 : 9, the high officials came to Ezra with a report (9 : 1). The translation of *sar* by prince in pre-exilic settings is misleading enough; in the time of Ezra (so AV, RV) it is meaningless. We are not told who they were. It is quite probable that they were some of the judges he had appointed, for they should probably be differentiated from those mentioned in v. 2. The apparent publicity of their report and its sequel makes it likely that Ezra had instructed them to find out how the land lay.

In distinctly exaggerated terms they suggested that the community had rushed like the Gadarene swine to destruction, that they, led by their principal men, were indulging in wide-spread mixed marriages. That it was a wild exaggeration is shown by the list of the guilty in 10 : 18-43. In all 113 are mentioned, which means less than 1% of all marriages. Should it be argued that only the more important are named, which intrinsically is quite possible, experience shows us that in normal times such marriages are always more likely among the rich, who have more chance to meet foreigners and more to gain by marrying them. So it is reasonable to think that our list gives us a fair picture of what had happened. In any case it is a common experience that the extent of such practices almost always tends to be exaggerated.

We saw earlier that Nehemiah was influenced by practical and valid reasons in attacking mixed marriages; Malachi had shown that behind some of them lay deep selfishness; here a new note creeps in. We are not in a position to judge these marriages. Some may well have been downright disastrous; others may have been entered on for the worst motives; in some cases the wife may have brought all her heathen practices with her. But none of these things are alleged.

Ezra's confession concerned itself only with the fact that the law had been broken (9: 10-15), and there is no suggestion that the commission (10: 16) was concerned with anything but the bare fact. In addition the officials used an expression they had probably learnt from Ezra himself, "the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands" (9: 2), cf. Isa. 6: 13.

It is, of course, possible, that no more than "the remnant" was intended, cf. 9: 14, 15, but this is doubtful. It must be remembered that the attitude of Judaism towards proselytes has always been ambivalent. Under favourable conditions they have been welcome, and at some periods actively sought.* On the other hand there has always been a tendency to suspect them. The most striking modern example was the strong protests of the Naturei Karta in Jerusalem, when their leader, Rabbi Blau, married a proselyte of long and impeccable standing. Their children have always been accepted without question, but all too often the convert has felt that in some way he was an outsider. When John the Baptist said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt. 3: 9), he was putting his finger on an underlying tendency. Ezra did not see the remnant in Judea merely as the bearers of a faith and the continuers of the covenant, but also as the physical continuation of the people of the covenant. It is to this, however much or little he was conscious of it, that we must attribute the drastic and to some extent inhuman treatment of these mixed marriages.

Obviously we cannot be certain, but the considerable number of sympathizers with Ezra's views who were present (9: 4; 10: 1) suggests that rumours had been allowed to circulate that something was going to happen. If that is so, the proposal made by Shecaniah ben Jehiel (10: 2-4) had probably been arranged beforehand. The vigorous terms in which the people were summoned to Jerusalem show how great and real the powers were that had been entrusted to Ezra as the king's representative.

One of the few things he could not control was the weather (10: 9). Since he had come from Babylonia, he probably had little idea of what Palestinian winter rain could be like. We cannot guess the real feelings of his hearers. They challenged neither the facts nor Ezra's authority (10: 12). They need not have been sympathetic towards the culprits, but they were not going to be pushed. The officials of verse 14 (*sarim*) were chosen by Ezra (v. 16) and were probably in part the same as those of 9: 1. The people demanded that those who were guilty should be given the chance of confessing their fault, for they wanted neither denunciations nor snooping into family matters. Then they demanded that those involved might be accompanied by the local elders and judges, who would know their family circumstances.

Even so there were a few who had courage enough to oppose the whole procedure. We know nothing of the two laymen, Jonathan and Jahzeiah (10: 15), except that they were not personally guilty and no obvious relatives are mentioned in 10: 18-43. From Ezr. 8: 16, Neh. 11: 16, it is clear that their two sup-

* cf. Matt. 23: 15. Their number cannot be established, but M. Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World*, pp. 60f., estimates that in the time of Julius Caesar 20% of the inhabitants of Rome's eastern provinces were Jews.

porters, Meshullam and Shabbethai, were of the highest standing.* Since their opposition is given us almost in brackets, as a virtual irrelevance, we cannot even guess the reasons they gave for opposing Ezra.

The two months needed for what was in essence a very simple task (10:16, 17) may have been due to the investigators' distaste for their task. It could have been caused by severe weather. In some cases the delay may have been used quietly to arrange a divorce, so that the culprits' names would not become known. In any case, before Passover came round, the whole matter had been settled.

The story ends with the strange statement, "some of the wives had borne children" (so margin of AV, RV). RSV, NEB are almost certainly correct in following the parallel account in 1 Esd. 9:36 and rendering "and they put them away with their children". *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (p. 211b) states, "The origin of the rule that the child born of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother is not considered a Jew is obscure, but scriptural authority is adduced from Neh. 10:29 (*sic!*, presumably Ezr. 10), where it is said that Ezra obliged those Jews who had married foreign wives to put them away together with their children". We may take it that this was in fact the beginning of the formal ruling.

Solemn Repentance

Our exegesis has been based thus far on the supposition that Ezr. 9, 10 in fact follows on Neh. 8. If that is so, then the story of the mixed marriages is rounded off by the account in Neh. 9:1-37. Our normal lack of familiarity with the Jewish festal calendar hides from us the difficulty presented by Neh. 9:1. If we take it as the sequel to Neh. 8, it demands that immediately after the rejoicing of Tabernacles with an interval of only one day the people had to return to Jerusalem for a major fast, and that in spite of the Day of Atonement, which had taken place only a few days before Tabernacles. In addition no reason for the fast is offered. Once, however, we place it after Ezr. 10, there is no difficulty in seeing in the ceremony the solemn climax to the purging of foreign elements from Israel. The actual sending away of the foreign wives and their children needed a little time, and so the concluding ceremony was postponed until after Passover.

Ezra was a wiser administrator than he is sometimes given credit for being, and he knew how to strike when the iron was hot. "The Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners" (9:2) is not merely suggesting that they turned away those foreigners who wanted to take part in their fast, and it certainly implies more than the sending away of the unfortunate foreign wives and their children. Ezra was making it virtually impossible for such marriages to be repeated. While the phrase may imply the expulsion of some few non-Jews who had no legal right to live in Judea, it means mainly the withdrawal of all voluntary contacts with non-Jews. Ezra's powers did not cover any but his own people. Implied here is the beginning of those laws of social life, which were effectually to isolate Jewry from its heathen surroundings. Though Galilee was

* This assumes that Meshullam was the one mentioned in Ezr. 8:16, but it was a common name.

largely Gentile in the first century of our era, the only Gentile specifically mentioned as coming into contact with Jesus was the centurion of Matt. 8:5-13, Lk. 7:1-10—the royal official of Jn. 4:46-53 need not have been a Gentile, and the Syro-Phoenician woman lived already in “the district of Tyre and Sidon” (Matt. 15:21). This is some indication of how complete the division had become in Palestine. Whether the Greeks of Jn. 12:20 were Gentiles, as is generally assumed, or Greek-speaking Jews, as maintained by some, they were at the worst, from the Jewish point of view, semi-proselytes, else they would not have come to Jerusalem for the Passover. The usual Jewish position is given by Peter’s words to Cornelius, and the attack made on him, when he returned to Jerusalem (Acts 10:28; 11:3). It should be noted that the rigorists in Jerusalem were apparently not disturbed by Cornelius’ baptism, but by “You have been visiting men who are uncircumcised and sitting at table with them” (NEB).

The Extended Torah

Ezra finished his great confession on the fast day with the words, “Behold we are slaves this day; in the land that Thou gavest to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom Thou has set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our cattle at their pleasure, and we are in great distress” (Neh. 9:36, 37). Here we have the great problem that faced those that had returned from Babylonia.

Idolatry was now a thing of the past. There is little evidence for any major social injustice after Nehemiah’s reforms until much later. Jehovah had shown His power by restoring them to their home land, and yet they were not masters in their own house. Even the extent of Ezra’s religious authority only underlined the complete absence of political independence. Sin could be the only explanation, and the only adequate sin to suit the circumstances was failure to keep God’s Torah, His Law.

The modern apologist for traditional Judaism makes great play of the fact that Torah does not mean law but instruction. While Ezra and his successors would doubtless have agreed with the sentiment, it is not likely that they would have accepted its implications. Scholars are apt to discuss how much Judaism took over from the Persians and their religion, but they seldom mention their concept of law. When we compare Dan. 3 with Dan. 6, in the former we find an oriental despot who decrees to satisfy his whim and changes his mind more quickly than he had first decided. In the latter we find a ruler bound by the sanctity of law, even though he had come to see its folly: the laws of the Medes and Persians did not change, though they might be circumvented.

Ezra and his circle seem to have been profoundly impressed by this concept. The Torah might be instruction, but it was not instruction a man might leave behind him as his nation and its citizens grew up into a deeper knowledge of God. Growth meant a challenge to apply not merely the principles of the Torah but also its ordinances, commandments and statutes to cover ever increasing areas of life. This was to be done logically and inexorably without

regard for the possible consequences. The time came later, when relaxations were made in order to preserve the life both of Israel and of individuals, but both then and down till today little thought has been given to the fate of the innocent who are made to suffer by man's misunderstanding of God's will, unless indeed Jewry as a whole or a major community is felt to be threatened.

It is impossible to know whether the action mentioned in Neh. 9:2 was, like that in 13:1-3, based on Deut. 23:3-5. Certainly vv. 7, 8 in their reference to Edom show that Moses was not intending a general separation from all outside Israel. It was so easy, however, to infer that if some were to be excluded then all should be, and it was much safer too.

Things were even worse where mixed marriages were concerned. That they were forbidden by the Torah is clear enough, cf. Exod. 34:16, Deut. 7:3, but there is nowhere any suggestion that they were not marriages, nor is there any punishment laid down for those that practise them. Ezra's logic was simple enough, and it has been repeated all too often by Christians, especially Roman Catholics. Because God condemned such marriages, it was inferred that they were not marriages at all. The men involved were put to public shame and presumably all had to bring a guilt offering, cf. Ezer. 10:19. But it was the women, who in most cases had no guilt, who had to bear the brunt of separation. They were turned loose with their children to go wherever they might, nor may we assume that they necessarily had their old homes to return to. There is no indication that Ezra was in the least concerned about the possible fate of the children thus turned loose on the world.

Here we see the beautiful simplicity of Ezra's concept. The keeping of the Torah did not merely mean the carrying out of what was expressly commanded in the Pentateuch. It did not even mean conforming to the interpretation which Ezra, with the power of the Persian state behind him, pronounced as official. It involved the applying of these principles to every conceivable aspect of life, even if they were unknown in the time of Moses.

Where these extensions were in conflict with age-old tradition they were bitterly opposed by many of the priests, who were, after all, guardians of tradition. Where they bore heavily on their lives and pockets, they met the passive resistance both of the land-owner and of the common people. But there is no evidence that Ezra's basic concept was ever seriously challenged. It needed the best part of a millennium before the imposing edifice of Jewry's religious law was finally worked out, and even then it had ceaselessly to be adapted to new circumstances as they arose, but it was all inherent in the principles which Ezra brought with him from Babylonia.

Ezra presumably returned soon after to the court of Artaxerxes; he disappears from the pages of history and not even Jewish tradition really knows anything more about him. But he left behind him his "judges and magistrates", who were doubtless paralleled in Babylonia and Persia, and they guaranteed that his work would continue.

We can best explain this silence by the intense hostility his reforms will have created in the Jerusalem priesthood and to a less degree among the city's richer families. The communication of the Torah to the common people and the

laying of responsibility for its keeping on them automatically decreased the authority of the chief priests. Though this became clear to all only a couple of centuries later, the probability must have been clear even during Ezra's lifetime to the thoughtful. Ezra's principles placed the poorer citizen religiously on the same level as the noble and rich, so they too in many cases were hostile and sided with the priests.

Stress is often laid on the value of rabbinic tradition. In practice it seldom shows validity before 100 B.C. The carriers of tradition at an earlier date were the chief priestly families, who had no interest in keeping alive memories of a man they bitterly disliked. It is unprovable, but the probable dislocations in Ezra-Nehemiah, though not deliberate, may well reflect this dislike and lack of interest.