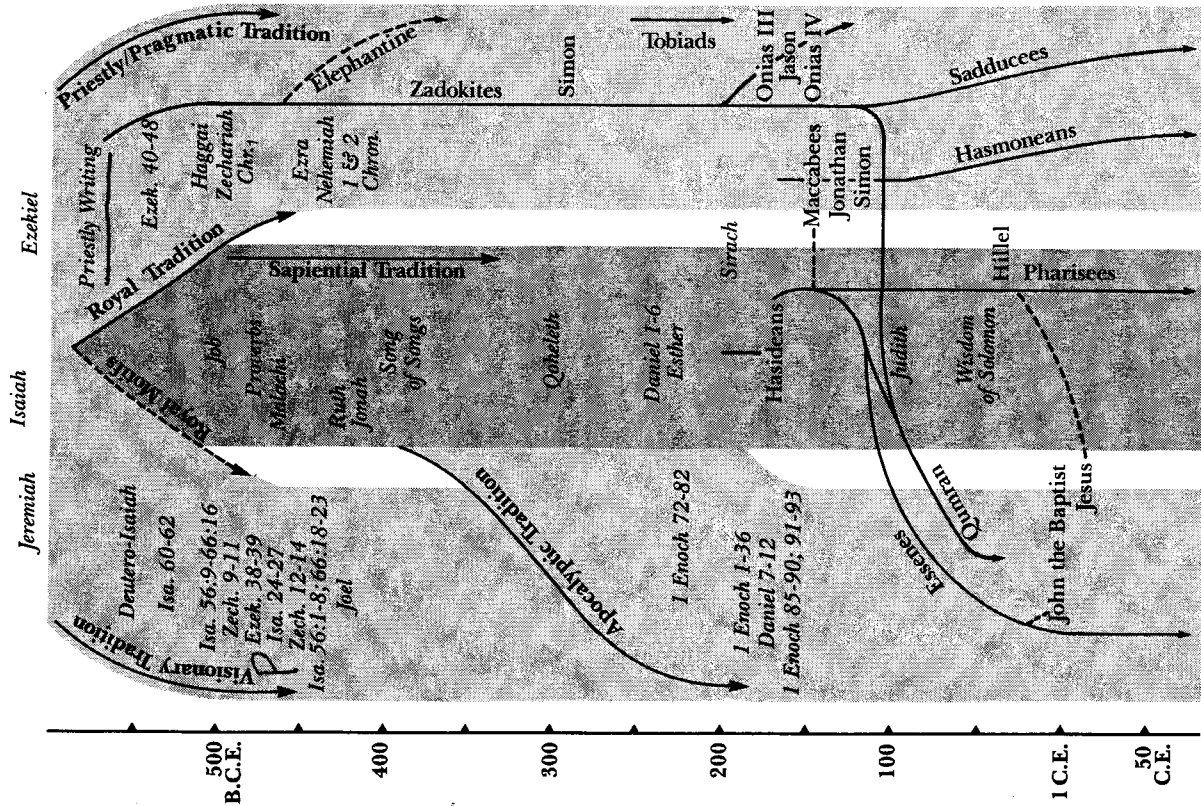


Paul D. Hanson, The People Called etc. (1986)

STREAMS OF TRADITION IN THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD



VIII

Return from Exile and Attempts to Reconstitute Community

(Chronicles, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Isaiah 24-27, 56-66, and Ezekiel 38-39, 44)

Much to cast down, much to build, much to restore; Let the work not delay, time and the arm not waste; - Let the fire be dug from the pit, let the saw cut the stone, Let the fire not be quenched in the forge.¹

Historical Note: Many Yahwists greeted the rise of Cyrus to a position of hegemony with enthusiasm and hope for the future, especially when it became clear that he would support the return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem and the restoration of the cult (the Edict of Cyrus, 538 B.C.E.). As high hopes collided with the harsh realities of rebuilding a devastated land, however, frustration and despair began to descend like a shroud over the returnees. The problem was compounded by tension between rival groups as they struggled for control over the rebuilding of temple and community. The Zadokite priestly party was able to repress the dissident group coming to expression in Isaiah 56-66, and with the support of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah was able to rebuild the temple between 520 and 515 B.C.E. But a deep wound had torn into the tissue of the community, setting the stage for continued struggle between Zadokites and Levites, and between those with pragmatic and those with visionary predilections throughout the Second Temple period (cf. the diagram on p. 252). Our literary corpus for this period will be the books of Chronicles, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, Ezra 1-6, Isaiah 24-27 and 56-66, and Ezekiel 38-39 and 44.

A. SECOND ISAIAH'S VISIONARY FOLLOWERS

Second Isaiah left to his followers a noble vision of God's plan for Israel and the world. It was a vision straining the limits of human lan-

1. T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 102.

stream of tradition, fostered down to this period by elements excluded from positions of leadership in temple and community, which interpreted every setback as further evidence of God's impending judgment. According to this view, only after the land had been purged of its present leaders could God inaugurate a new era of blessing and prosperity, an era in which those disenfranchised by the Zadokites would be elevated to positions of honor and in which all the nations would bring tribute to the glorified Zion.

This visionary position in turn had been discredited by so many unfulfilled prophecies that the stage was set for a pragmatic program of reform coming from within the existing cultic and communal structures and offices. All that was necessary was a catalyst. That role was filled powerfully and impressively by Ezra and Nehemiah, who came to Jerusalem from Persia with royal permission to reform the languishing community. In a propitious manner, the interests of the religious leaders of Judah and the established foreign policy of the Persian empire converged: Judah was to be strengthened as a buffer state bordering Persia's chief enemy Egypt, by the renewal of the cult on the basis of the Torah. This state of affairs was ideally suited for a Zadokite leadership class willing to collaborate with the Persian authorities as a means of safeguarding its own position of preeminence and of strengthening the cause of its own program of community reform.

The question of whether Ezra preceded Nehemiah, or vice versa, is still debated, and cannot be taken up anew here. Each contributed specific elements to the overall reform associated with these two figures, and therefore the historical question does not affect the analysis of the reform in general. More important in this context is the relation of the Ezra and Nehemiah literary sources to the interpretative work of the Chronicler, who drew those sources into his larger history, which extends from 1 and 2 Chronicles through Ezra and Nehemiah. Most valuable as an historical source are the Nehemiah Memoirs in Nehemiah 1:1-7:5, 11-13, and 9:38-10:39 (with mention of Ezra added secondarily in 12:26 and 36), for they give us a reliable account of Nehemiah's work between 445 and 433. The Ezra source in Ezra 7-10 and Nehemiah 8:1-9:37 (with mention of Nehemiah added secondarily in 8:9) combines historically reliable sources (like the Artaxerxes Edict in Ezra 7:12-16) and oral traditions about Ezra with the Chronicler's own commentary. The latter is also the dominant element in Ezra 1-6 and Nehemiah 7:6-73a (Heb. 72a).

On all levels of tradition, Ezra is identified with the mission of reading the Torah of Moses to the assembly of Jews gathered in Jerusalem and of renewing the covenant between God and community on the basis of this Torah. There is no doubt that this accurately describes Ezra's chief contribution to reform.² It is a picture that can be filled in with a fair degree of probability. As indicated by the genealogy in Ezra 7:1-5,

2. Cf. K. Koch, "Ezra and the Origins of Judaism," JSS 19 (1974), 173-197.

Ezra himself was a Zadokite priest (Ezra 7:1-5). "The law of Moses" [*torat mōšeh*] in which he was skilled as a scribe (7:6) may have been some form of the Pentateuch, that is to say the Torah as it had been developed toward its authoritative form by Zadokite priests in Babylon. At any rate, in Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and writings coming from later in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, *tôrâ* frequently refers specifically to the "Books of Moses"; that is, the Pentateuch. Whereas we have used the transliterated form of "*tôrâ*" in this study whenever that word was applied in its broad sense, we shall render the narrower sense of the "Five Books of Moses" with the form "Torah."

The Aramaic "Letter of Artaxerxes" in Ezra 7:12-26, though worked somewhat from the Chronicle's perspective, likely gives an accurate account of the commission granted Ezra by the Persian court: "For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law [*Aramaic dāt*] of your God, which is in your hand (Ezra 7:14). In this task Ezra was granted both financial and legal support by the Persians, and exemption from taxes for himself and his priestly colleagues.

Ezra's assignment is described in more detail in the concluding paragraph of the royal letter:

And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and those who do not know them, you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed upon him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment. (Ezra 7:25-26)

The Torah (*dāt*) in Ezra's hand is here defined as the constitutional document of the Jewish community.³ By acceptance or rejection of the Torah, individuals define themselves as either inside of or outside of that community. Ezra is empowered both to set up structures of administration and granted the supreme powers of enforcement. The significance of this development can scarcely be overstressed, for it meant that in the official judgment of the world power of that day, the priestly version of Yahwistic faith contained in the Torah of Moses was the *religio licita* in the land. For the Persians, this meant that a basis had been established for the restoration of order in a land that, hitherto torn by rival factions, had proven to be a buffer of dubious dependability between the Persian empire and its rival to the south, Egypt. For Jewish religion itself, it means that tremendous legal clout had been added to the Zadokite cause: the Persian empire stood unequivocally on the side of its claim that acceptance of the Torah of Moses, as interpreted and enforced by the Zadokite priestly leadership, constituted citizenship in the true community of Israel. An accommodation with the powers and

3. Cf. S. Talmon, "The Sectarial *yhd*—A Biblical Noun," VT 3 (1953), 133-140.