

Judaism, Is It the Religion God Gave to Moses?

PART 3

If we are to understand the full development of Judaism, we must go back in history over 500 years before Christ. In these centuries history has shown why and how "Judaism" replaced the law God gave to Moses and became the religion of the Jews! Judaism is the religion that Catholicism claims to be their roots! See the book compiled by the Anti-Defamation League "Spiritual Pilgrimage, Text on Jews and Judaism 1979-1995, Pope John Paul II."

We must begin our study of the development of Judaism with the Babylonian captivity. Between the years 604 B.C. and 585 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, made war with the Kingdom of Judah. In the first year of the war, Nebuchadnezzar carried away the majority of the Jews from Judah to Babylon. By the year 585 B.C. all the Jews, except those under Gedaliah were finally carried away to Babylon.

The Babylonian captivity came to an end in 539 B.C. Isaiah had prophesied about 200 years before that Cyrus, the king of Persia, would be responsible for the overthrow of Babylon. Thus, it was made possible for the Jews to return to Palestine. "Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known Me" (Isa. 45:1-4). Babylon was captured and absorbed into the Persian Empire.

Because Cyrus was so concerned with the prophecy Isaiah wrote about him, he determined to honor the God of Judah and decreed those of the Jews who wanted, could return to Palestine and rebuild the Temple of God. "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and He hath charged me to build Him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all His people? The LORD his God be with him, and let him go up" (2 Chr. 36:22-23).

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (Ezra 1:1-2).

Some 50,000 Jews later returned to Palestine. They were under the leadership of two men. Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, and Joshua, the High Priest. The Jews were to rebuild the Temple and establish the true worship of God. The books of Haggai and Zechariah were written during this period. These books describe the condition of the Jews at this time.

The majority of the Jews did not return to Palestine. Most elected to remain in the Babylonian area. Under the rulership of Cyprus, many of the Jews had their own home, business and they were wealthy and influential. Most did not want to give up all this and return to the wasted land of their forefathers. "Even Cyrus did not want all

to leave Babylonian area, since this would cause a setback to the economy of the area" (Edersheim, Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah, vol i, pg.8).

The majority of the Jews were content with living in Babylon. They had no desire to return. The Jews were settling down to stay. They built permanent schools, colleges, and synagogues. Even though there were several migrations to Palestine, the bulk of the Jews remained in Mesopotamian area. Even as late as the New Testament time, there were still more Jews in Babylon than in Palestine (ibid., vol i, pg. 7-9). This explains why the Apostle Peter was in Babylon in the later years of his life. "The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son" (1 Pet 5:13).

After the death of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the people began to take a lazy attitude regarding the Temple services and religion in general. Even though the temple has been completed by 515 B.C. the people of Palestine took no interest in rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. It still remained in ruins. The people had also begun to intermarry freely with the idolatrous Gentile people round about them. The religious life was becoming corrupt. As the years rolled by, the condition became worse and worse.

In the summer of the year 457 B.C. Ezra came to Palestine to rectify the serious situation that had gotten out of hand. Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron and some of his forefathers had been former High Priests in Israel. His grandfather was the High Priest who returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua to Jerusalem in the first migration back to Palestine (Cyclopaedia of Biblical Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol iii, pg. 435). Ezra, himself, was a scribe, a ready scribe of the law of Moses. A scribe of the words of the commandments of the Lord and His statutes to Israel, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven" (Ezra 7:11-12). "He was considered by Josephus, the Jewish historian of the apostles' days, to have been in a sense, the High Priest" of the Jews who were still living in Babylon" (Antiquities of the Jews, xi, 5,1).

Scripture says, "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). We can see Ezra was determined to live by the laws of God and to teach them to the people. "He had profound influence over the Jews, and so righteous was his character that later Jewish writers said he would have been the lawgiver to Israel had not Moses preceded him" (The Talmud, Sanhedrin, c.ii).

Ezra knew the laws of God--he was well trained in them. God directed that he go to Jerusalem to beautify the Temple, establish its services in proper order, to teach the people the laws of God and to rebuild the city. He went with the authority from the Persian government in 457 B.C. About 2000 went with Ezra to Palestine. These were notable priest, Levites and servants of the Temple. They went to restore worship of God to Jerusalem.

Ezra went to Jerusalem with a royal decree from the king of Persia. Ezra had the power he needed to carry out reforms. He had the power to restore true worship of God and he also had the authority from the King to appoint magistrates and judges which may judge all the people that are beyond the river in Palestine. "And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment" (Ezra 7:25-26). Ezra went to Jerusalem not only as a priest, but he went to establish law and order by rebuilding Jerusalem as the capital of Judah.

Why was the king of Persia so interested in the Jews religion and why did he want Jerusalem to be rebuilt and inhabited? "Esther, a Jewish girl, from the tribe of Benjamin, became Queen of Persia, and Mordecai, her uncle, became Prime Minister of the Kingdom. Esther was married to King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) who ruled, according

to Persian reckoning from 485 to 465 B.C. The King under which Ezra was appointed to rebuild Jerusalem was Artaxerxes I--the son of Exerxes, Esther was still, undoubtedly, the Queen Mother, when Ezra left for Jerusalem in 457 B.C. Thus we see that there was considerable Jewish influence in the king's palace at this time. The real intent of Ezra was to establish the Law of Moses as the constitutional law throughout Judaea" (Herford, Talmud and Apocrypha, pg. 33). This was to make Judea a model state within the Persian Empire. The Persian rulers living far from Judea, seldom interfered with the internal affairs of their Jewish subject, as long as the royal taxes were paid, and order maintained. This was the policy of the Persian rulers for the two centuries they governed Palestine. This gave the Jews ample opportunity to settle down firmly in Palestine and to practice their religion without undue interference.

The first thing Ezra found upon his arrival in Palestine was that most of the people possessed only a small amount of knowledge about religion. Temple services were not being conducted properly and a great number of people had intermarried with foreign women. Ezra warned the people that these very acts were a violation of the Law that caused their forefathers to be carried away into captivity! "And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day" (Ezra 9:5-7).

We find all people were not willing to put away their foreign wives. It took about 13 years to get all the people to forsake their own ways and be obedient to the Laws of God. The reason why they were commanded not to take foreign wives was because people have a tendency to accept the religion of their mates. King Solomon was the perfect example of leaving the true God for pagan worship to please his wives. Solomon even set up pagan idols in Jerusalem and throughout Israel to please his pagan wives. "For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father" (1 Kings 11:4). God's law specifically commands the Israelites not to marry heathen women or men. "Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods" (Exo. 34:15-16). Ezra commanded the Jews to repent of their pagan ways and begin keeping the commands of God. "Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son" (Deu. 7:3).

Ezra was to establish the civil law in Palestine. He was to follow the laws given to Moses by God. He was determined to see that the Jews obeyed the commandments of God as revealed in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Within these four books are found the basic spiritual commandments of God, plus many basic laws and statutes of the civil nature for the governing of the physical nation of Israel. Also within these books are the ritualistic and ceremonial laws of purity and the sacrificial ordinances that formed such a distinctive part of the Law of Moses that by the New Testament times the term "Law of Moses" often became a special and exclusive term for the sacrificial ceremonies and physical rituals. "And by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). It took the help of Nehemiah to finally implant the Law of Moses as the law of the land.

Nehemiah was a high government official in the Persian kingdom. After learning of the Jews plight in Palestine and the difficult time Ezra was having getting the Jews to obey the laws of Moses, he resolved to help the

situation. He petitioned the king to become governor of the province of Judea directly under the king. The petition was granted. He went to Jerusalem as governor of the whole province of Judaea!

Upon his arrival in the twentieth years of Artaxerxes, Ezra's position was greatly strengthened. Both Ezra and Nehemiah worked together in harmony toward getting the people back to God. They established the Law of Moses as the law of the land and set up the Temple service in proper order and made the people put away foreign wives. The ordained priests were judges, teachers, and administrators of the government.

Under Ezra and Nehemiah, the people, the Levites and all the principal men came and signed a covenant that they would henceforth obey the laws of God. In the covenant they signed, they all agreed to perform seven things. 1). They were to keep all the laws, statutes, judgments and commandments of God. 2). Not to intermarry with the heathen. 3). To keep the Sabbath holy. 4). To observe the Sabbatical year. 5). To pay the annual third of a shekel for the upkeep of the Temple. 6). To supply wood for the altar in the temple. 7). To pay all the tithes that were commanded in the Law (Nehemiah 10:28-39). The leaders signed the covenant on behalf of the people. This proved to be a spiritual renewal in Israel. It was a kind of Church and state relationship. This resulted in a religious unity not known since the days of Joshua. Ezra was called the second Moses.

The convening of the Jewish elders was of great importance. This assembly was called the "Great Assembly." It was comprised of Ezra, Nehemiah, two of God's chosen along with all the principal priests of the Jews. This assembly was the ruling institution to guide the religious life of the Jews. It was the religious supreme court. This assembly initiated by Ezra and Nehemiah has often been called by the Greek name "The Great Synagogue." The word "synagogue" in Greek means assembly.

"According to the most ancient tradition, this assembly or synagogue was styled great because of the great work it effected in restoring the divine law to its former greatness, and because of the great authority and reputation which it enjoyed" (Cyclo. Of the Bible, Theo. And Ecc. Literature, Vol x, pg. 82). Some of the decisions of this Great Assembly have had far-reaching effects---even to our present day.

The Jewish historians tell us that there were 120 members in the original Great Assembly (Beerkoth,ii,4; Megillab, 17B) all of these members were priests (Herford, Talmud and Apocrypha, pg. 59).

The president or ruler was the High Priest. However, when the Great Assembly was organized by Ezra and Nehemiah, the High Priest, Eliashib did not meet with the assembly. He did not agree with the covenant the Great Assembly made binding. "And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah" (Neh. 13:4). The priests were the leaders of the Jewish nation at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, about 400 years before Christ. ☞

In the next issue we will see how the Great Assembly put together the Old Testament Scriptures with the help of God's Spirit. (To be continued in the next issue of the "Prove All Things").

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