

JUDAH AND BENJAMIN— A NEW ENTITY

To sum up: In the religious evolution of the Israelite nation, we have to differentiate between certain periods each of a distinct nature:

1. The period of the Israelites in Canaan before descending into Egypt. This is the period of fetishism, the worship of the Ashera – tree worship, the worship of El Shaddai – god of the fields.

2. The period of slavery and assimilation in Egypt which ends with the Exodus.

3. The desert period – from the Exodus until the beginning of the settlement in Canaan and receiving of a new monotheistic religion of the God – Adon – Adonai. This is the period of pure monotheism and worship of the one God – Adonai.

4. The settlement period by the tribes in Canaan after the death of Moses, Joshua. and the elders During this period the nation returns to the worship of a multitude of idols and deities such as the Ashera – El Shaddai, the bull – calf, various Egyptian deities and Baal deities – masters of localities (cities). The nation assimilates with the inhabitants of the land and adopts their deities as well. It is obvious that the deities which the Israelites add to their worship are adapted to their own needs, and are merged with their own. The need for the command: "thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the Lord thy God"¹). (the Hebrew text reads. אַשְׁרָה כִּי . אֲשֶׁרָה... – = Ashera any tree...) points to the fact that the Israelites have merged the Ashera, their primary deity, with the monotheistic God Adon. Therefore we may assume that such merging took place not only with Ashera – Adon but with other deities as well.

This period of polytheism continues, as the Bible shows, for as long as the Israelites remained settled on their land, until they were taken into captivity and exiled. From the biblical narratives it is certain that the Israelite nation did not forget the God Adon, but continued worshipping him together with other deities at the same time. Such worship was in complete contradiction to the main principles of this monotheistic religion. The God Adon must have had to descend from his monotheistic heights, and there is reason to believe that the Israelite nation accept him as a national henotheistic god standing at the head of the other deities. Actually there do exist certain forces which work to restore Adon to its pure monotheistic position held before,

1 Deut. 16: 21.

which find their echo in the writings of the prophets in the Bible, showing how the struggle over the monotheistic tradition lasts for a long period until the nation goes into exile.

5. with the captivity and exile, a new period begins which proves to be a crucial one for the Israelite nation. It must be assumed that the people going into captivity, adhere to all the deities they have been accustomed to worship before. Yet all these deities being masters (possessors) of localities or districts, i. e. territorial. In captivity they are no longer significant since there is no connection whatsoever between them and the new localities. With such disconnection from their native land, they become devoid of content. the God Adon – the Monotheistic god – is the only one who can provide for the nation's needs even in the diaspora, outside the boundaries of the land of Israel Thus by sheer force of circumstance they return to the acknowledgement of the God Adon. According to the Bible, this process attains the summit in the days of Ezra the scribe who had most probably formed a new monotheistic creed based on the old monotheistic religion of Moses So it was in the land of captivity that Adon – the monotheistic god that had become a henotheistic god in the land of Israel, reverted to being monotheistic. Presumably, Ezra does not restore the crown to its original glory, but adds certain novel aspects to the religion of Moses. He regards the name of the God as a mere symbol, and any name– Ehye Asher Ehye – ("אהיה אשר אהיה" Ex. 3: 14) =I shall be Whoever I shall be (translated: I am that I am) can symbolise the deity, i. e. God is the main principle, and not his name. Although Ezra's creed is based on the religion of Adon – an already existing name for the monotheistic god believed in by the people, and retained by Ezra, he most probably adds to it the four letters (the Tetragrammaton) JEHOVA (יהוה) that may had already been used before as an adjective for Adon. This deity then receives a more universal, abstract conception: the basis of this creed is that of Moses, but it becomes a different religion. A group of people form around Ezra the scribe, propagating his ideas, and disseminating them. Just as any reformer and as Moses did in his time, so Ezra in his own time wants his views accepted. He realizes that most probably his creed will not take root in captivity because of the many external influences against which he, as a foreigner, cannot fight. But if he returns to the land of Israel it would be easier to fight for the preservation of his teachings (Torah–תורה)

Let us not forget that this process takes place only in captivity. What has happened with the remaining people who did not go into captivity?².

In 2Sam. 24 we read about king David counting the number of Israelites: "And there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men "(ibid. v. 9).

According to 1Chr. 21: 5 the number was: "All they of Israel were a

2 See for example: Neh. 13: 24 ; Ez. 9: 1–2

thousand thousand and an hundred thousand men that drew the sword; and Judah was four hundred threescore and ten thousand men that drew sword" i. e. one million and five hundred and seventy thousand men altogether in Judah and in Israel that "drew sword ". Hence the total population at the time of David must have numbered about four and a half million people – assuming that about 30% of the population were potential soldiers.

According to the Bible Tiglath – Pileser King of Assyria carried, as captives to Assyria, all the Land of Naphtali alone (2Kn. 15: 29). Shalmaneser carried away only the Israelites from the town of Samaria (2 Kn. 17: 6). In an inscription in Chorasbad, Sargon II informs us that he "led away prisoners 27, 900 inhabitants of it"³. The deportees to Babylon in Jehoiachin's days included only ten thousand people (2Kn. 24: 14 ff.). The deportees carried away by Nebuchadnezzar in the days of king Zedekiah is solely from the city of Jerusalem, and according to the Book of Jeremiah (52: 30) "all the persons were four thousand and six hundred". The number of deportees from Israel and Judah altogether did not, therefore, attain even half a million persons. According to May,⁴ the number of Israelites deported could not have been more than one– twentieth to one–fiftieth of the total population, and he therefore concludes that the ten tribes of Israel were never lost "because they were never deported". Lods⁵ estimates that about three–quarters of the Israelite population remained in the land. He assumes that the number of deportees from Judah in the years 581, 586, 597 B. C. were at most about 20,000 persons, whereas the total population must have numbered about 90,000. This he based on an estimate of 30 inhabitants to one square km. in an area of about 3000 sq. km. Among others, he cites Guth who believes that the deportees did not number an eighth of the total population. As mentioned above, in David's time the population of Israel and Judah must have numbered about four and a half million, and this number could not have changed significantly by the time of the captivity. What had then become of the remaining people? What was their fate from a religious point of view? . It is understandable that the remaining population continued to worship the various deities which they had worshipped before the captivity, since these deities – lords and masters of localities and cities did not lose their significance in the eyes of those still living in the country. For them, the link with their particular locality still remained.

The deportees who returned led by Ezra believed in the monotheistic creed while that part of the nation which remained in the land and did not

3 See: According to Botta, in Pritchard, ANET, Princeton 1950, p. 136. ; ANE, paperback printing 1973, p. 195.

Barton, Archeology and The Bible, p. 466 (according to Winckler).

4 May, The Ten Lost Tribes, BA, VI (3), 1943, pp. 55–60.

5 Lods, Les Prophètes D'israël et Le Débuts Du Judaism, pp. 196–197.

go into captivity continued to worship the multitude of deities among whom they also worshipped Adon. But this is no longer the creed of Moses, nor is it that which the deportees bring back with them, although they do have a common basis. Two such contradictory movements could not have existed together and must have come into collision with each other. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah depict precisely this state of affairs. Ezra, like Moses before him, acts firmly to quash the beliefs prevalent in the country so as to preserve the existence of his own creed. In his struggle he is assisted by Nehemiah, the commissioner to Judah. Since Nehemiah's authority is only valid for the district of Jerusalem and Judah, he drives out the disobedient only from this district.⁶ But in places where Ezra and Nehemiah were without power, the inhabitants must have continued to worship their deities as they had before. The monotheistic movement which Ezra and Nehemiah tell us about concerns ONLY THOSE WHO RETURNED FROM CAPTIVITY, and takes place ONLY IN JUDAH WITH REFERENCE TO THE TRIBES OF JUDAH AND BENJAMIN ALONE: "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of JUDAH and BENJAMIN, and the priests and Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem "(Ez. 1: 5). In this Book of Ezra we read: "And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the CHILDREN OF THE CAPTIVITY (בני הגולה) that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem.... Then all the men of JUDAH and BENJAMIN gathered themselves together"⁷. "...When the adversaries of JUDAH and BENJAMIN heard that THE CHILDREN OF THE CAPTIVITY builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel"⁸. "And the CHILDREN OF THE CAPTIVITY kept the passover... and killed the passover for all the CHILDREN OF THE CAPTIVITY, ...And the children of Israel which were COME AGAIN OUT OF CAPTIVITY, AND ALL SUCH AS HAD SEPARATED THEMSELVES UNTO THEM from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat."⁹ i. e. the religious movement is of those who came back out of captivity from among the tribes of Judah and Benjamin together with those who "had separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land". It is obvious then, that there were also those who did not separate themselves "from the filthiness of the heathen of the land". and they were the majority of the nation. These surely were not accepted by the reformed group which had returned from the captivity, as we may read: "...The people of Israel, and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations even of

6 See: Neh13: 25 ; 28 ; 30 ; Ez. 9: 12

7 Ez. 10: 7-9 (My emphasis).

8 Ez. 4: 1 (My emphasis).

9 Ez. 6: 19-22. (My emphasis).

the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites...Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth FOR EVER..."¹⁰.

From the fact that this reform movement takes place in Judah alone, we must conclude that in the other districts of the land the Israelites did not separate themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land. Therefore we must assume that two groups of completely different standards are formed: The first were those who separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen. It included those who returned from captivity together with people of the land who separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land. The second group were those who did not separate themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land and it included the whole country of Israel except the district of Judah and Benjamin (namely: ten tribes), yet there exists a very strong tie between them. Both these groups with different trends in religious outlook have a common past, possess the same language and are part of the same culture and tradition. This fact in itself endangered the creed of Ezra, and in the natural course of things might have led to the assimilation of those who returned from captivity with the heathen majority.

Ezra therefore erects a protective barrier around those who returned from captivity, enforcing their isolation in Jerusalem and Judah, and not allowing them to come into contact with the outside world. Such isolation could not be a lasting solution, for with the death of Ezra and Nehemiah the people would break out of this isolation forced upon them. In order to prevent this and the resulting assimilation of the two trends of religious belief the only solution Ezra can resort to is the destruction of those points of contact bridging the two: i. e. language, culture and tradition.

In the Talmud¹¹ we read: "Rabi Yosi says: it was fitting for Ezra to have given the Torah (tables of the covenant), if Moses had not anticipated him. It was said about Moses that he ascended (Mount Sinai – N. G.), so it was said about Ezra that he ascended (immigrated to Israel – N. G.)...and despite the fact that he did not give the Torah, he did change the script, AND ALSO HE RECEIVED (gave) A SCRIPT AND LANGUAGE" (My emphasis – N. G.). The same idea differently expressed can be found in the Jerusalem Talmud, Megilla A 8 (71; 72, etc.) and in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin (21; 72; etc.) where we read: "In the beginning the Torah (The five Books of Moses) was given to Israel in the Hebrew script and in the Holy language. It was again given to them in the days of Ezra in Assyrian script and Aramaic language. Israel chose Assyrian script and Holy language and left for the layman the Hebrew script and Aramaic language."

¹⁰ Ez. 9: 1; 12 (My emphasis).

¹¹ Tosephta Sanhedrin 4, 7.

The Talmud ascribes to Ezra the change of the script from the Ancient Hebrew to the Assyrian. According to Prof. Tur – Sinai¹² the meaning of the word "script" (ketav – כתב) in the above verses is a "form" and he concludes that Ezra brought with him from Babylon a new form of the Torah, different from the one that existed in Israel. The term "Labonaha" which was given to the ancient Hebrew script he explains as meaning "forged", and finds it astonishing that the language and script were changed at all. Tur Sinai asks:¹³ "...and indeed this belief that the Tanaim referred to the change from the ancient Canaanite alphabet to the Assyrian script encounters many difficulties, some of which are quite obvious. The Canaanite script was not only given names without acceptable explanation, being called the scripts of Daatz, Raatz, or the Labonaha script – Why should there be such strange sounding terms for the national script, the traditional script inherited from the forefathers? ...and there is no question here even of beauty, since the Ancient Hebrew – Canaanite script, as discovered in the Lachish letters especially, is far more beautiful than the later script in all its forms known to us till today".

Evidently the change of script and language by Ezra was a vital factor in the preservation of his creed. Therefore, by branding the ancient script as Labonaha script i. e. forged script, he diverts the people's mind from the ancient script and advocates his own.

Every nation creates its culture on the basis of its past inheritance. The creed of Ezra, in order to be accepted by the people, must take its roots in the nation's past. But this past is filled with pagan culture. Ezra cannot wipe out such a past with one stroke, nor can he deny facts well known to everyone. Yet he cannot build upon a past which stands in complete contradiction to a monotheistic outlook. Ezra was faced with a problem for which there was only one solution: to leave the past as it was but to interpret it in the light most convenient for him. He gives the past a color and character which serve his own views. He collects together all the cultural legacy (or part of them) and like Akhenaton in his time¹⁴ who had tried to establish the creed of Aten in his country, by erasing the names of deities from all steles and engraving the name of Aten; or like Raamses II who had erased the names of preceeding kings from memorial inscriptions and put his own name instead – so here, Ezra abolishes the names of the different Baalim and deities, and substitutes the name Jehovah instead, or sometimes "Adonai – Jehovah" to whom he ascribes all the properties and titles of the deities which the nation ever knew. For example El–Melech, El–Elion, El–Olam, El–Shamayim, El–Zedec etc.

12 Halashon Vehasefer, vol. I, 1954. ch. 7 – Ktav Hatorah. (Heb.)

13 Ibid. p. 124.

14 The Egyptian king Akhenaton instituted in Egypt the worship to one god – Aten – Aton, the sun disc.

(God the king, The Supreme God, God of the Universe, God of the Heavens, God of Righteousness). In many instances he also gives new explanations for names and events connected with idol names, e. g. Israel, which is the name of the nation derived from Ashera-tree worship. A new meaning is given to the name by bringing the story of Jacob who fought against God and men, and has prevailed (Gen. 32: 2–28). The same is done with the name Jerubaal, deriving from Baal, Benjamin (Ben – Oni) deriving most probably from Ben-On-son of On, etc. Ezra lends the heritage of the past a new look and the characteristics of a monotheistic religion. To allow the God – Adonai – Jehovah and the monotheistic outlook to take root within the nation's consciousness, Ezra creates the impression that it had originated in Abraham's period already. He gives a monotheistic interpretation to all events occurring in the world and in Israelite history. All the political and economic changes, in Israel or in the entire world, are explained from a religious monotheistic point of view. Everything is done by the will of "Adonai-Jehovah" – he lowers and raises kings, his glory fills the earth. He is the force which rules over the universe and all creatures do his wish alone. Every event is an act of his; whoever worships him is good, and whoever does not is wicked. A good king is the one who worships him, whereas a bad king is one who does not do so. Ahab, Omri and others were bad kings because they "worked wickedness in the sight of the Lord" whereas David, Solomon and others are good kings because they have done good deeds in the sight of the Lord. The Israelite nation was driven out of Israel not because it was defeated in battle but because they "worked wickedness in the sight of the Lord ". The king of Assyria or the king of Egypt won the battle with the Israelites because they are the scourge of justice in the hands of God and fulfil his wishes: he sent them to punish Israel This entire complex of cultural legacy and national history, granted a religious monotheistic colouring by Ezra, and perpetuated by others, sets the foundation for the composition of the Bible.

Ezra does not recount Israelite history, only Jewish history i. e. the history of the district of Judah. The history of the rest of the nation is not related in the Bible and only mentioned incidently when it is connected with Judaeen history. There is reason to believe that this is why the Bible gives the impression that Saul is the first king in Israel For the same reason Hiram, Ethbaal and others are not mentioned as Israelite tribal kings, and are referred to only in connection with David and Solomon, and their liasons with them, as kings of Tyre and Sidon. The same applies to the fact that the Book of Judges is deficient in details, and that the Book of Chronicles begins with the events dating from King Saul.

In spite of the religious monotheistic character given by Ezra to Israelite history, he does not meddle with historical facts, since it would be impossible to do so with what was common knowledge. But because of the changes made

in their colouring, discrepancies occur between various factual statements. These have caused, and still cause many scholars to reject the Bible as a reliable historical reference.

By editing the Bible and changing the ancient Hebrew script with that for the Assyrian script, Ezra demolishes the bridges between the two halves of the nation, forming a spiritual barrier substantial enough to last for generations after his death, and which will prevent the people of Judah from assimilating with the other half of the nation and other peoples surrounding them in general, as well as ensuring the continued existence and survival of the monotheistic creed of Adonai – Jehovah in particular. In the light of what has been said here, it can more easily be understood why Ezra is spoken of so highly: "It was fitting for Ezra to have given the Torah..."etc. Moses gave the Israelite nation the monotheistic creed of the God Adon, whereas Ezra developed this creed and gave it much wider and more universal significance. He founded the monotheistic creed of Adon Jehovah – this being the new version of the religion of Moses which Ezra had brought back from captivity.