Hu Ezra Alah mi-Bavel: Ezra as an Exemplar of Babylonian Superiority in Rabbinic Literature

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1 Introduction

The character of Ezra as portrayed in the Bible, is that of a renowned restorer of Jewish sovereignty to Israel and its associated Second Temple. He also teaches the Torah of Moses, and enforces the laws regarding holiday observance and genealogical purity within the community.1 Rabbinic literature characterizes Ezra as a second Moses, lawgiver and leader, even as many of his enterprises appear innovative.2 Ezra thus functions as an exemplar, used by rabbinic authors in “an attempt to recover an idealized or utopian past.”3 His exemplarity is expressed in multiple ways within rabbinic literature.

As with any exemplar, leaders of subsequent generations will be connected to Ezra in one way or another. Thus, an Ezran discourse exists throughout rabbinic literature, connecting characters—especially rabbinic leaders—as well as particular legal discourses to Ezra in order to legitimate them. This paper will analyze much of that Ezran discourse, based on a single literary trope from the Book of Ezra threaded through rabbinic literature, and will demonstrate how the various characters and texts are tied to Ezra. This literary-thematic endeavor will both demonstrate the scope of Ezra’s influence within rabbinic literature and illuminate particular characters tied to Ezra.

For the case of Ezra, someone who repatriates from Babylonia into Israel, and whose story is subsequently read by rabbis in both Babylonia and the land of Israel, questions of geography are paramount. What are the power dynamics

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1 Reinhard Kratz (“Ezra—Priest and Scribe,” in Leo G. Perdue, Scribes, Sages, and Seers: The Sage in the Eastern Mediterranean World (Gottingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2008), 163–88, at p. 181) summarizes the biblical Ezra’s focus as “concerned with the temple (Ezra 7–8), the purity of his people (Ezra 9–10), and the hearing and doing of the law (Neh 8).”

2 Many rabbinic texts make this characterization clear. Some will be treated below.

between these two great Jewish centers, and how can rabbinic traditions about Ezra shed light on them? There exists some scholarship on the relation between the two centers, but this matter has yet to be fully explored from the angle of the treatment of Ezra. As this paper engages the character of Ezra as presented by both Babylonian and land of Israel sages, it will also explore this issue of geography, which underlies much of the material.

2 Treatment of Biblical Material

While many parts of the book of Ezra impact upon rabbinic literature, this paper will focus on one half of a single verse, the echoes of which propagate throughout the rabbinic corpus. This verse must be seen in its original biblical context, the introduction of Ezra to the scene (Ezra 7:6):

הוא עזרא עלה מבבל והוא ספר מהיר בתורת משה ...

This Ezra came up from Babylon, a scribe expert in the Torah of Moses . . .

Two straightforward facts are introduced at this juncture: Ezra ascends to the land of Israel from Babylonia, and he is an expert scribe in the Torah of Moses. The former point, situated in its context, announces his new position as leader of the returning Babylonian Jews, and the latter points to his expertise in Torah knowledge, which is further explicated in Ezra 7:10. Later, the books of Ezra–Nehemiah note Ezra’s priestly lineage (Ezra 7:11, etc.), his efforts to rebuild Jerusalem (throughout the book), and teach and enforce the law—regarding both holidays (Neh 8) and the genealogical purification of the community by the dissolution of marriages with foreign women (Neh 10). This paper will provide close readings of multiple talmudic texts that either cite or allude to this half-verse, with an eye toward the question of how later leaders are depicted

4 See generally the work of Isaiah Gafni, and especially Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
6 As we will see in greater detail below, this is not a matter of ritual purity, but purifying the seed of the community by excluding foreign-born women from remaining married in the community.