

Ezra: A new Moses?



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Abstract

Whilst exaggeration in apocryphal writings has lent itself to Ezra being viewed as a second Moses and the father of Judaism, his significance should nevertheless not be underestimated. He is a towering figure in the unfolding drama of the Bible's story line. This essay explores and analyses the grounds on which Ezra might be viewed as a new Moses. He is compared and contrasted to Moses in relation to his role, reforms, connection to the Torah, and his place within the Bible's eschatological story line. Of particular attention is Ezra's exodus-like return to Babylon and the establishment of a worshipping community centred on the temple and Torah. This essay's conclusion is that Ezra may be viewed as a new Moses in some respects but not others. He is similar to Moses in his role as a covenant mediator and leader of a new exodus, but in a realised eschatological sense he is not the final, new Moses.

That Ezra is an OT ‘figure of towering importance’[1] is undisputed among scholars, but his relationship to Moses remains less clear. The method of approach will be to present the grounds on which Ezra might be viewed as a new Moses in relation to his role, reforms, connection to the Torah, and finally, his place within the Bible’s eschatological story line. This essay’s conclusion is that Ezra may be viewed as a new Moses in some respects but not others.

Ezra’s date of return to Jerusalem has long been debated. For the purposes of this essay the traditional view of 458 B.C. will be assumed.[2] So also will the chronological and theological unity of Ezra-Nehemiah,[3] along with the consistency of Ezra’s mission with contemporary Persian policy.[4]

There are good reasons for considering Ezra as a new Moses, not least with his role as a priest and scribe (Ezra 7:1-5, 12, 21; Neh 8:9; 12:26). The long genealogy of Ezra 7:1-5 stresses his importance as Aaron’s descendant and a very great nephew of Moses. Ezra is not called the son of his father but of Seraiah: the last pre-exilic, officiating priest; leading some to view him as a new high priest who would reconstitute one new Israel.[5] ‘Scribe’ should not be understood as the γραμματεὺς of New Testament times,[6] but as a skilled teacher of the Law, whose role it was to interpret and apply the Law.[7] Bright translates Ezra’s title ‘Scribe of the Law of the God of heaven’ as ‘Minister of State for Jewish Jewish Religious Affairs’.[8] So whilst being a teacher of the Jewish Torah he was nevertheless also a representative and employee of the Persian government. As a priest and teacher Ezra held a mediatory role in Israel,[9] and thus like Moses was a covenant mediator (Deut 4:1, 14; 5:31, 6:1;

31:19, 22).[10] This mediatory role continued throughout the Mosaic dispensation and so Ezra stood in Moses' line as a covenant mediator and applier.

Artaxerxes' edict reveals that Ezra's mission 'concerned religious matters only' and that his reforms were primarily cultic (Ezra 7:13-26).[11] Ezra's mission was to gather God's people around the temple and under the Mosaic Law.[12] The religious significance of Ezra's reforms were: the Torah was returned to the centre of life (Ezra 10:34; Neh 8:1, 13, 18; 9:3; 13:1); God's people were responding in repentance and with a new desire for holiness (Ezra 9:1-2; 10:1-4; Neh 8:9; 9:1-38; 13:1-3); the cult was purified (Ezra 9:1-2; 10:3, 10-11); the remembrance Feast of Tabernacles re-established (Neh 8:13-17 cf. Deut 16:13-17; 31: 9-13); covenant renewal (Neh 9:38; 10:28-39); and the remnant preserved (Ezra 9:1-2). The Torah was Ezra's catalytic agent to bring about these cultic reforms (Ezra 9:14; 10:2). As Bright notes succinctly, 'Torah had created the community'.[13] And so Ezra's cultic reforms – focusing on the temple and Torah – are not dissimilar to Moses' aims in Exodus to Deuteronomy of establishing Israel through the law as a worshipping community around God's dwelling place.

Such reforms were also not without political or social ramifications. For Persia, a united Jewish people in a secure city would act as a strong garrison from any southern or western threats.[14] Politically, Israel never became a nation again, but this does not appear to be one of Ezra's intended reforms. Even the mention of the royal seed in Ezra 8:3 is not made much of; Israel's postexilic identity was the temple and the Torah, and not really the monarchy.[15] Socially, religious separation became a consequence of Ezra's reforms.[16]

Ezra's connection to the Torah has also influenced how he might be considered as a new Moses. Exaggeration in apocryphal writings has lent itself to Ezra being viewed as a second Moses and the father of Judaism.[17] In the 19th century Wellhausen propagated the view that Ezra compiled the Pentateuch during the exile and brought a new Torah to Jerusalem.[18] In this sense, he was a second Moses by being the inaugurator of a new Law; a completed Pentateuch. Consequently, Wellhausen and others thought that Israel's postexilic life was more legal than cultic, thus supporting the view that Ezra was the father of Judaism; 'the protagonist of the absolute validity of the Torah'.[19] Such a position fits with the rabbinic tradition of Ezra as a renewer of Moses' work, and has led some to believe Ezra was the founder of the 'Great Synagogue' of scribes.[20]

This traditional position can be refuted on various grounds. First, as will be shown below, Ezra viewed the Torah more as promise than law, and attempted to 'realise certain prophetic promises' (Neh 9:36).[21] Despite the fact that the promulgation of Ezra's law had consequences for the future and became one of the presuppositions of later legalistic Judaism, this does not mean that Ezra's intention was likewise. Second, the clear emphasis on the antiquity of the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:6, 10, 14, 25; Neh 8:1) provides evidence that Ezra possessed the Pentateuch already.[22] Third, Ezra's reforms involved application of laws from Ex 34:11-16 and Deut 7:1-4 – not new laws.[23] The covenant made in Neh 10:28-39 reflected the laws of Deuteronomy.[24] Fourth, the Law was subordinated to the temple and cultic concerns (Ezra 7:13-26). Fifth, Ezra simply taught and applied the Law, but did not enforce it. Rather, the contrary occurred: upon hearing the Law the laity responded with suggestions for reformation (Ezra 9:1-2, Neh 9:38-10:39, 13:3).[25] Sixth, there

is a shift in Ezra-Nehemiah from leader to community,[26] which runs contra to Ezra as a founding father of Judaism or of hierarchy. Therefore, on these grounds, Ezra is not a new Moses: he does not bring back a new Torah, but rather the old Law of Moses. However, there are narrative and eschatological grounds on which Ezra might be viewed as a new Moses; to which we now turn.

Since Koch's influential article *Ezra and the Origins of Judaism* it has not been uncommon for scholars to view Ezra as a new Moses.[27] Koch proposed that the march from Babylon to Jerusalem was a cultic procession, which Ezra understood as a second exodus and a partial fulfilment of the prophetic expectations.[28] His thesis is not without biblical warrant for the following reasons. First, temple building was the goal of the Mosaic exodus (Ex 15:17).[29] Ezra too was sent with the prime aim of establishing a worshipping community at the temple (Ezra 7:13-26). Second, there are textual allusions to an exodus motif. The root *'ala*, 'to go up, to make a procession' is used three times (Ezra 7:6-7, 9) in conjunction with the date of arrival – the first month – and thus patterns the timing of the first exodus (cf. Ex 12:2; Num 33:3). The date of departure from Babylon is further emphasised by the syntactical connections of *ki* in Ezra 7:9 and 7:10: Ezra's study of the Law led him to depart at that particular time.[30] The 'seventh year' of Artaxerxes may allude to a sabbatical year: a year of release and redemption (Deut 15).[31] Third, the circumstances of the return portray exodus connections. Ezra refused to proceed until there were Levites present. It appears that he wanted them to lead the march since there were already Levites in Jerusalem who could officiate the cultic practices (Ezra 10:23 cf. Num 10:33; Josh 3:6ff). New exodus themes in Isa 52:11-12 are echoed in Ezra's patience at Ahava (Ezra 8:15, 21-23) and his trust in God's protection for the journey, rather

than opting for a military aide (Ezra 8:22-23). The repeated phrase ‘the hand of the LORD’ (Ezra 7:6, 28; 8:18, 22, 31) reflects images of the first exodus (Ex 3:9; 6:1; 8:9) as well as the prophetic exodus in Isaiah 40:9-11; 51:9-11.[32] Fourth, the reoccupation of the land resembles the first conquest of the land. Both involved cleansing of the land with either forbidding or dissolution of mixed marriages (Ezra 9:1; 10:3; cf. Lev 18:24-30; Deut 7:1-3; Ezek 36:16-36).[33] The celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in the land was a reminder of the wilderness journey (Neh 8:17 cf. Deut 16:13-17).

Thus, the picture of a new exodus can be clearly seen from the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative.[34] In this way, Ezra is presented in the Bible’s story line as similar to Moses. Through Moses the Israelites went up out of Egypt and were established as a worshipping community around God’s tabernacle through the Law. Through Ezra the exiles went up out of Babylon and were established as a worshipping community around the temple through his teaching of the Law. Yamauchi has also suggested seeing Ezra as a second Moses in the comparison of persistent grief for the people’s sins (Ezra 10:6 cf. Ex 34:28; Deut 9:18).[35] These are the grounds on which Ezra might be considered as a new Moses.

However, does a new exodus necessitate Ezra as a new Moses? Surprisingly, Koch does not see Ezra as a new Moses: ‘In contrast with the first exodus, there is now no Moses. But he is not necessary, because his Torah is in the hand of Ezra!’[36] Koch has noticed an important shift in the Bible’s unfolding drama: the Torah has replaced Moses. In the Old Testament, Moses stands alone as the sole inaugurating law-giver (Ex 19:19-20, 23-24; 24:2, 15-18). ‘Ezra 7, which reports his commission, makes every

effort to stress the antiquity of the law which Ezra brought with him (cf. Ezra 7:6, 10, 25).[37] In other words, Ezra does not inaugurate a new Law but rather brings the old Law with him. Connecting the redactional seams of Deut 34:10-12 and Mal 4:4-6 in the Hebrew Tanak, Wells states: ‘from the Canonicer’s postexilic perspective, “no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses” (Deut 34:10)’.[38] Thus Moses stands as the giant of the old covenant whose type has not yet been fulfilled; Ezra falls far short of Num 12:6-8 and Deut 34:10-12. Twelftree notes that ‘signs and wonders are understood to validate the divine origin of an accompanying statement or revelation’.[39] Ezra’s reforms were inaugurated by a return to the already-given Law of Moses – not by new revelation attested with signs and wonders.

There are further dissimilarities between Moses and Ezra in the narratives of the Pentateuch and Ezra-Nehemiah. Moses is a narrative hero,[40] whereas Ezra is absorbed into the community.[41] Moses is viewed as a patriarchal figure,[42] a divinely appointed leader who represented Yahweh himself (Num 11, 14, 20, 21 and 25), spoke face to face with him (Num 12: 6-8), and acted as his very mouthpiece (Lev 1:1-2). In Exodus 32:9-10 Moses is portrayed as the faithful remnant, an ‘Israel’ within Israel, from whom God would make a new nation. Ezra, on the other hand, is only a member of the exilic remnant (Ezra 9:8, 13-15). Moses is a servant of Yahweh through whom God wrought the exodus (Josh 1:1-2, 7; 8:31, 33; 11:12; Ezra 9:14; Neh 1:7-8). Ezra is not given this typological title, and it is Cyrus who is the pre-eschatological fulfilment of the Servant – not Ezra (Ezra 1:1-4 cf. Isa 45ff).

Whilst Ezra re-enacted a new exodus his reforms did not bring full restoration since postexilic life betrayed such a reality (Ezra 9:7-9; Neh 9:36-37). The people remain in

exile in the land.[43] Ezra's reforms have not worked as is seen in the need for Nehemiah's further reforms at the close of the narrative (Neh 13:4-31), and in Malachi's prophecy. Ezra's law brought no change of heart. However, whilst Ezra disappoints, the narrative does not drive us to Wellhausen's conclusion of a buried eschatology.[44] Rather the story of Ezra-Nehemiah contains strong allusions to Isa 40-55 and Jeremiah 31, which provide prophetic hope.[45] Thus Ezra's reforms serve as a 'pre-eschatological step towards a final eschatological fulfilment'.[46]

In conclusion, the grounds on which Ezra might be considered as a new Moses have been analysed in relation to his role, reforms, connection to the Torah, and his place within the Bible's eschatological story line. Ezra may be viewed as a new Moses in some respects but not others. He patterns Moses in his role as a covenant mediator and leader of a new exodus. He is not a new Moses in regard to inaugurating a new Torah, as Wellhausen and others propose. Nor in a realised eschatological sense is he the final, new Moses. (This essay highlights the need for further research into the area of typology and its restraints. What are the definitional boundaries of a *new Moses*? And what are the qualifications for a biblical figure being a new Moses or a new David?)[47] Ezra is similar to Moses in many ways, yet he is not the long-awaited prophet (Deut 18:15-18), the Servant of Yahweh (Isa 40-66), the final, new Moses (Deut 34:10-12), who will usher in the new covenant and bring complete restoration, not only to Israel, but also to the whole world. Only when Jesus comes are all these eschatological expectations realised in him, who is the long-awaited prophet (John 6:14), the Servant of Yahweh (Luke 4:18-21), and the final, new Moses (Matt 5ff; John 20:30-31).[48]

Footnotes

[1] John Bright, *A History of Israel* (4th ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 389.

[2] For a full discussion of each position – traditional (458 B.C.), intermediate (428 B.C.) and reverse order (398 B.C.) – see Edwin M. Yamauchi, ‘The reverse order of Ezra/Nehemiah reconsidered’, *Themelios* 5:3 (1980): 7-13.

[3] As opposed to David Kraemer, ‘On the Relationship of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 59 (1993): 73-92, who argues for two separate works. H.G. M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Word Bible Commentary; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), xxi-xxiii, provides good reasons for a unified work.

[4] So Iain V. Provan et al., *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 299-300; and Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), 183-184, contra David Jansen, ‘The “Mission” of Ezra and the Persian-Period Temple Community’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 619-43.

[5] Klaus Koch, ‘Ezra and the Origins of Judaism’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 19:2 (1974): 190, and David Bossman, ‘Ezra’s Marriage Reform: Israel Redefined’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 9:1 (1979): 38.

[6] Koch, 183.

[7] B. E. Kelly, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 198.

[8] Bright, *History*, 386.

[9] P. Ellingworth, ‘Priests’, in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 698.

[10] O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 293.

[11] Bright, *History*, 385.

[12] Kelly, ‘Ezra-Nehemiah’, 195.

[13] Bright, *History*, 431.

[14] Provan et al., *Biblical History*, 299-300; and Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 183-84.

[15] Bright, *History*, 390.

[16] Bright, *History*, 409.

[17] Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 62, cites 2 Esdras as evidence that the Jews held a fantastic view of Ezra as the inspirer of Scripture and other apocryphal writings.

[18] Koch, 173, 182. Koch also holds this view, despite most of his thesis refuting Wellhausen's view of postexilic life being more legal than cultic. Koch's argument is that whilst Ezra brought a new Torah to Jerusalem, he viewed it as promise not law.

[19] Koch, 174.

[20] H. L. Ellison, 'The Importance of Ezra', *Evangelical Quarterly* 53 (1981): 48-53.

[21] Koch, 189.

[22] William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Biblical and Theological Classics Library; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1984), 204.

[23] William J. Dumbrell, 'Malachi and the Ezra-Nehemiah Reforms', *RTR* 35:2 (1976): 51.

[24] Compare Neh 10:30 with Deut 7:3; Neh 10:31 with Deut 5:12-15; 15:1-23; Neh 10:35-36 with Deut 26:1-19; Neh 10:37-39 with Deut 14:22-29.

[25] Kelly, 'Ezra-Nehemiah', 197.

[26] Dumbrell, 'Malachi', 51. So also Douglas Green, 'Ezra-Nehemiah', in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 212.

[27] For example, Edwin M. Yamauchi, 'Ezra-Nehemiah', in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 670; and Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A theology of the Hebrew Bible* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Leicester: Apollos, 2003), 224.

[28] Koch, 184.

[29] William J. Dumbrell, 'The Theological Intention of Ezra-Nehemiah', *RTR* 65:3 (1986): 69.

[30] Koch, 186, and H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 85-86.

[31] Kelly, 'Ezra-Nehemiah', 197.

[32] Dumbrell, 'Malachi', 47.

[33] William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A theological survey of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 318.

[34] There is also an earlier exodus portrayed in Ezra 1-6 that need not detain us here. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 86, notes: 'As presented in this book, therefore, the second exodus (Ezra 1-6) is not a solitary event, but the type of experience which successive generations may enjoy.' See also Peter J. Leithart, *A House for My Name* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2000), 229-238.

[35] Yamauchi, 'Ezra-Nehemiah', 670.

[36] Koch, 187.

[37] Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 204. This also therefore refutes the Wellhausen school of thought.

[38] Jay M. Wells, 'Figural Representation and Canonical Unity', in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann; Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 123.

[39] G. H. Twelftree, 'Signs and wonders', in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 776.

[40] P. E. Hughes, 'Moses', in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 668.

[41] Green, 'Ezra-Nehemiah', 212.

[42] See Hughes, 'Moses', 669, for a lucid insight on Moses as a 'sojourner' like the patriarchs (Ex 2:22).

[43] Pate et al., *The Story of Israel: A biblical theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 68.

[44] Koch, 189.

[45] J. G. McConville, 'Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfilment of Prophecy', *Vetus Testamentum* 36:2 (1986): 223.

[46] Koch, 196.

[47] For example, see Dumbrell, 'Malachi', 52, who presents a thought-provoking case for Ezra being a pre-eschatological fulfilment of the Elijah-to-come (Mal 3:5ff). Also in William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985; Repr., Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 65. If, in some respects, Ezra does pattern Elijah, does it disqualify him from patterning Moses in other respects?

[48] Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1991), 256.

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