

# The Story of the First Torah Scroll

By Jim Myers

Ezra is called “*The Father of Judaism*” because he is the scribe linked to making the copy of the first Torah scroll. Today we know a lot more about what Babylon was like at the time he lived and about the work of scribes in that world. Babylon was a city of 196 square miles<sup>1</sup> and it was divided into different sections by large roadways. The people that lived in those sections were linked together by things like tribal affiliations, professions and religions. Forty-three temples were located in one section of the city; fourteen temples formed the religious center of the city with the central focus on *Marduk’s temple*.<sup>2</sup>

Scribal instruction took place in the “*temple workshop*” and an apprentice scribe was referred to as “*a son of the temple workshop*.” Apprentices often dedicate their exercise tablets to the god of the temple; on the occasion of religious festivals they offered their work to the deity in token of their devotion. Under the auspices of Nabu, the god of writing, students spent years in the temple workshop in order to become accomplished scribes.<sup>3</sup>

As the result of tablets that tell the story of another scribe we will call “*Udjah*” (Udjahorresnet), we are able to fill in a lot of missing information about the story of Ezra. The parallels between the mission of Udjah and Ezra are striking. In 518 Darius the new Persian king ordered the governor of Egypt to create a commission of priests, scribes, and military leaders to collect the laws of Egypt, redact them and produce a new document. Egyptians needed it to rebuild their temples and supporting institutions.

Gathering pieces of old documents and putting them together to form new documents was something Babylonian scribes were trained to do. One of their famous scribes was named Sin-leqe-unninni was known for his work on the *Gilgamesh Epic*. He gathered pieces and fragments from different sources, which he called “twisted threads.” His job was to weave them together and produce a “*new text*.” It took the Egyptian commission and scribes over ten years to sort through and “twist their threads” together to produce their new document. Darius then sent “Udjah” to Egypt with it and the authority to restore their temples and implement the new laws.<sup>4</sup>

Ezra was sent by another Persian king to take a new scroll of Judean laws to Judah and create the infrastructure required to implement it, which included a network of regional centers for public instruction and jurisdiction. The part of the story that’s missing from the Bible’s account about Ezra, is the part about the king appointing a commission of Judean priests, scribes and leaders to collect and edit ancient Judean laws required to produce the scroll.

We believe that when Cyrus allowed exiles to return to Jerusalem in 536 BCE, a “*temple workshop of Yahweh*” was built in section where the exiles lived. Babylon was a polytheistic city and many of the gods that were worshipped in the First Temple in Jerusalem, so building a “*temple workshop of Yahweh*” would not have been a problem. That’s the most likely place the exiled Judeans would have stored their scrolls, ritual vessels and other writings.

Around 475 BCE another Persian king mandated Judean leaders in Babylon to begin work on creating a national constitution for the Persian state of Judah. Their work was completed

about 460 BCE. The scroll they created was the first Torah scroll. It is important to understand that Ezra was not only a Judean priest and scribe; he was an official representative of the King of Persia and backed by Persian authority.<sup>5</sup> That is clearly stated in the decree that he took to Judah with the Torah scroll and another scroll.

*Whoever will not observe the Law of your God and the Law of the King, let judgment be executed speedily on him, whether it be death, or banishment, or confiscation of goods, or imprisonment. (Ezra 7:26)*

Ezra is called “the founding father of Judaism” because the Jewish people would be known as the “*people of the book*” from that point on. Second Temple Judaism wasn’t “*the restoration of the old First Temple Israelite religion*” -- *it the beginning of something distinctly new.*<sup>6</sup> *Future revelations will come through the reading and contemplation of the words of Sacred Scriptures.*

The Persian Empire fell in 322 BCE to Alexander the Great of Greece.<sup>7</sup> The *Hellenistic Period of Judah* began and will last until 63 BCE – 269 years (27 years longer than the United States has existed). With the arrival of the Greeks, the power the scroll of the Laws of the King of Persia ended. Scribes of that period produced a new collection of Sacred Writings -- *the Prophets, Psalms and Proverbs*. The additional books, combined with the democratizing forces of Hellenism, produced sects with “their unique interpretations the Scriptures,” shifted authority away from the priests and scribes of the Temple.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reading Babylon* by Marc van de Mieroop; *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (Apr., 2003), pp. 257-275; p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> *Reading Babylon*; p. 269-270.

<sup>3</sup> *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* by Karel Van Der Toorn © 2007; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA; p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* by Karel Van Der Toorn © 2007; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA; p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*; p. 251.

<sup>6</sup> *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*; p. 250.

<sup>7</sup> *Scriptures, Sects and Visions*; p. 12.