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Religious Holidays of the Jewish People in the Post-Exilic Period

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Abstract

The Jewish community that returned to Palestine from the Babylonian exile organized itself around the rebuilt Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, the city that became the religious capital of the Jews once again. Through the two religious reformers of the time, Ezra and Nehemiah, a new historical phase of the Jewish people began, a phase during which the post-exilic Judaism was renamed “Judaism”. Thus, a state is emerging, based on the Temple in Jerusalem and a theocratic society governed by the priestly class and the ‘council of the elders’, who conveyed Yahweh’s message to the people. The old Jewish festivals, together with the new ones, also gave shape to the new religious realities.

Keywords

Mosaic law, Temple of Jerusalem, Jewish priesthood, religious holidays, Ezra and Nehemiah

I. Historical Preliminaries

The destruction of Jerusalem and the conquest of Palestine by the Babylonian Empire in 587 B.C. affected primarily the religious life of the Jewish people, by making it impossible to carry out the usual practices of

worship¹. The two major deportations of the Jews to Babylon in 597 and 587 BC virtually destroyed the kingdom of Judah. The leading members of the priestly class at the Temple in Jerusalem were deported to Babylon, many of whom were killed at Riblah by Nebuchadnezzar. Representing one of the most important social classes of the Jewish people, the priestly tribe of the tribe of Levi was to feel the full effects of the dramatic deportation to Babylon. The lack of a temple in the Babylonian exile and the difficulty of preserving the Mosaic cult, to a certain extent, destroyed the hierarchical differences between the unhonoured Levitical priests and the descendants of Zadok². On the other hand, the land of Palestine did not remain uninhabited throughout the period of the Babylonian exile; part of the population was used for agricultural work and was given the opportunity to preserve the Mosaic cult. Among those who remained were Jews from the tribe of Levi, who took over the priestly function in this context³.

Returning to Palestine from the Babylonian exile, the Jewish community organized around the rebuilt Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, the city that became the religious capital of the Jews once again. Through the two religious reformers of the time, Ezra and Nehemiah, a new historical phase of the Jewish people began, when post-exilic Judaism was renamed “Judaism”. In the post-exilic Jewish community, a socio-religious nationalism develops that forbids the penetration of paganism. The religious prescriptions written in the Torah⁴ represented the norms of the Jewish communal life. The teaching of the Torah was passed on to the people in the synagogue meetings⁵, but the highest form of fulfilling the

¹ Helmer RINGGREN, *Israele: i padri, l'epoca dei re, il giudaismo*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1987, p. 333.

² Rolland DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento*, III edizione, Editura Marietti, Genova, 2002, p. 379.

³ Peter R. ACKROYD, *Exile and Restoration*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1968, pp. 40-41; R. DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico...*, p. 379.

⁴ *Torah* represents the collection of the books of the Pentateuch and it was formulated between 450-350 BC.

⁵ The synagogue, as a place of worshipping of the Jews, appeared during the Babylonian exile as a consequence of the impossibility of practicing the ritualistic cult. Thus, the religious meetings of the members of the Jewish community in exile were held in places identified as “the synagogue”, a custom which was preserved especially in the

Jewish cultic duties was attendance at religious ceremonies in the Temple in Jerusalem⁶.

II. The Post-exilic Mosaic Priesthood – Keeper and Preacher of the Law

The revival of the Jewish society after the return from exile was largely due to the strong Jewish communities in the Diaspora, especially in Babylonia, who supported, by all means, the process of restoration of the social-religious life of the people. The representatives of the priestly class were given a particularly important role in the community that had returned from exile, with the temple servants being relieved of public duties; these measures were part of the policy of respecting the religious specificity of each subject people, through which the Persian administration sought to ensure the peace and internal stability of the vast empire. Ezra and Nehemiah also played a decisive role in the process of national and religious revival, as they succeeded in restoring the basic structures of the Jewish society and giving back its specific, identitarian framework through complex measures⁷.

Ezra, a member of the priestly class, the great-grandson of Hilkiah the priest, who 160 years earlier had led the reform of King Josiah (Ezra 1, 1; II Kings 22, 8), learning of the decadent state of his countrymen in Jerusalem, returned to Palestine, bringing with him a royal decree which ensured that the Jews would live privately and religiously according to their own laws, being subject to the imperial laws only as regards public and civil life⁸. “Being a skilful scholar in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7, 6), he was sent to Jerusalem in the eighth year of the reign of Artaxerxes

Jewish diaspora even after the end of the Babilonian exile. The term is of Greek origin and it means “gathering” or „meeting”.

⁶ Gianni CAPPELLETTI, *In cammino con Israele. Introduzione all'Antico Testamento*, vol. I, Editura Messaggero, Padova, 2009, p. 378.

⁷ Mark A. THRONTVEIT, *Ezra e Neemia*, Editura Claudiana, Torino, 2011.

⁸ Vladimir PRELIPCEANU, Nicolae NEAGA, Gheorghe BARNA, Mircea CHIALDA, *Studiul Vechiului Testament*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1985, p. 178.

(458 BC), his aim being to enforce uniform observance of the Law⁹. With the support of the central authority of the empire, Ezra receives countless gifts from the public treasury and the king's personal household for the Temple of the Lord, the treasurer beyond the Euphrates giving Ezra 100 talents of silver, 100 hearts of wheat (one heart equals 370 kg), 100 bars of oil, 100 bars of wine (one bar equals 37 liters), and salt without counting (Ezra 7, 22).

Ezra is accompanied on his return by 1,500 Jews and 260 Levites, a relatively small number, considering that the royal decree allowed any Jew to return to Palestine: "And with him went some of the sons of Israel and priests and Levites and singers and porters and those entrusted to the temple to Jerusalem" (Ezra 7, 7). These were in addition to the 42,360 of the tribe of Judah and Benjamin, among whom were 4,289 priests, 74 Levites, 128 singers, 139 temple porters, and 392 temple servants. The small number of Levites can be justified by the inferiority of their position in the Jewish cult in relation to the priests descended from Aaron; noticing the very large difference between the number of priests and Levites who returned from exile, it is also assumed that many Levites assumed the role of priest during the exile, which is unlikely¹⁰.

One of Ezra's first actions was to ensure that the people knew the Law and obeyed its most important prescriptions. In addition to conformity to worship, and in particular to the observance of sacrificial worship and the Temple feasts, Ezra requires the people to obey the laws of a social nature, and in particular, the Sabbath. He receives special support for the re-establishment of the Jewish society after the exile from Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah, the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah, learning of the deplorable state of his people and of Jerusalem, obtains permission from the Persian king to be sent governor of Judah, with the power to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-2). He arrives in Jerusalem in 445 BC, and succeeds in mobilizing the inhabitants of Jerusalem in an exemplary manner, so that the walls of the city are rebuilt in only 52 days, despite

⁹ J. S. WRIGHT, "Ezra", in: *Dicționar Biblic*, Editura Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 1995, p. 433.

¹⁰ Manahem HARAN, *Temples and Temple service in Ancient Israel. An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978, p. 108; M. A. THRONTVEIT, *Esdra e Neemia...*, pp. 36-37.

all the hardships coming from neighbouring governors (Nehemiah 6, 15). Nehemiah then took a series of particularly important measures aimed at restoring social peace¹¹. Thus, he organized the repopulation of Jerusalem, deciding that every tenth man from all the surrounding towns and villages should go and live in the capital of his own free will (Nehemiah 7 and 11).

In particular, Nehemiah supported Ezra religiously in terms of the people's observance of the law. The law becomes the foundation of society. The character of Jewish society undergoes an obvious transformation, changing the sequential order from alliance-commandment to commandment-alliance¹². The law will henceforth be laid at the foundation of the Jewish identity, a fact that is still evident today. Publicly, the Law is read to all the people by Ezra, and it is then decided that it will be read and explained regularly by the priests and Levites, so that all the people will fully comply with the prescriptions of the Law (Nehemiah 8). Ezra, along with the priests and Levites, were empowered to teach the Jews the Torah (Ezra 7, 25). Under his guidance, the Torah was accepted as the foundation of individual and communal life.

The measures taken by Ezra and Nehemiah in terms of the observance of the Law by the people had as a determining factor of support the priestly class, which, more than ever in the history of Israel, assumed the role of teacher of the Law. A major paradigm shift thus occurred in the priestly ministry, whose emphasis was no longer on sacrificial worship, but on assuming its community role in teaching and keeping the Law.

III. Jewish Holidays in the Post-exilic Period

The religious holidays of the Jewish people were systematized in a calendar based on all Jewish religious sources: the Elohist tradition, the Yahwist tradition, Deuteronomy, the Law of Holiness, and some indications from Ezekiel and Numbers. The term denoting the feast in general is *mo'ed*, which represents a place or time set for the gathering; the Tent of Meeting

¹¹ Josy EISERBERG, *Judaismul*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1995, p. 50.

¹² Andre LA COCQUE, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist*, Editura Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, 2010, p. 18.

was called 'ohel mo'ed, and the term ha'g was used to refer to some major feasts during the year. The Jewish calendar – based on the Babylonian calendar – had the following festivals in the pre-exilic period: *the Feast of Passover* (followed by *the Feast of Unleavened Bread*, which lasts a week after Passover), *the Feast of Weeks* and *the Feast of Tabernacles*; these are attested long before the Babylonian exile. In the post-exilic and modern periods, the calendar of Jewish holidays has continued to grow richer, with new holidays appearing: *the Day of Atonement*, *Hanukkah*, *New Year's Day* and *Purim*.

We will briefly introduce each of them:

The Feast of Passover (Pesah)

Passover is the most important holiday of the year for the Jews. In the books of the Old Testament, the Passover celebration is mentioned at decisive historical moments for the Jewish people, such as: the exit from Egypt (Exodus 12), the entry into Canaan (Joshua 5) and the return from the Babylonian exile (Ezra 6). The Passover Feast is also described in detail in II Chronicles 30, but there are also external sources that provide information about the Jewish Passover, the most important of which are a papyrus and two “ostrakas” from Elephantine (Egypt).

The priestly tradition of Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28 presents the feast of Passover as united with the feast of Unleavened Bread. Passover is celebrated in the first month of the year. On the 10th day of the month a healthy male lamb of a year old is sought, and on the evening of the 15th day of the month it is slaughtered. The sacrifice, called a *zebah*, involves preparing the lamb over charcoal and eating it entirely on the same evening. Unleavened bread and bitter herbs are eaten with the paschal lamb and the Passover meal is celebrated with the family. Participants at the festive meal are dressed for departure, in remembrance of the departure of the Jews from Egypt at God's command. The Passover feast is followed by the feast of the Azimim (*Mashot*) the Unleavened Bread . Beginning on the 15th day of the first month of the year, the unleavened bread is eaten for seven days, and the first and seventh days are considered days of rest, during which religious meetings are held.

Deuteronomy – in chapter 16, 1-8 – presents, like the priestly tradition, the Passover feast united with the Feast of the Unleavened Bread in the month of Aviv, without specifying the day of the celebration. The importance of Deuteronomy's account lies in the fact that it mentions the place where the Passover is to be celebrated, which is considered to be Jerusalem, where the Ark of the Covenant is located: "You may not keep the Passover in any of your cities, which the Lord your God will give you. But only in that place which the Lord your God shall choose, that his name may remain there; you shall kill the Passover in the evening, at the going down of the sun, at the time when you came out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 16, 5-6). It seems that the information in Deuteronomy concerning the pilgrimage to the city of Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover is a prescription introduced specifically in support of Josiah's centralizing reform to channel the religious life of the Jewish people in the direction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The origin of Passover is traced to the time of Israel's exit from Egypt, when God sent the tenth plague on the Egyptians, a punishment that killed all their firstborn sons. The term used to identify Passover is Pesah, a word related to the root psh, which means "to arise". Another hypothesis links the term to the Akkadian word pašâhu, which translates as 'punishment'. However, the fact that the Passover feast is not 'atoning' removes any doubt about the invalidity of this hypothesis.

Setting the date for the celebration of Passover on the 15th of the first month of the year¹³ corresponds to the time of the "full moon". The choice of this day must have been linked to the fact that, on the journey through the desert of Sinai, the night of the "full moon" was the one which ensured absolute clarity in the darkness of the night, avoiding any connection with astral interpretative value. The correlation of the Passover feast with the feast of the Unleavened Bread (Massok) is linked to the agrarian event of the harvesting of the first grain fruits, when unleavened bread from the new grain harvest was eaten for a week. The fact that the two feasts

¹³ The influences upon the Jewish calendar determined a change as regarding the month of the celebration of the Passover. According to the Babilonian calendar, Passover was celebrated on 15 Aviv (March), but in the Book of Esther the first month was considered Nissan (July), showing, thus, a confusion in this sense; nevertheless, the Jewish Passover has always been celebrated in the month Aviv.

were celebrated in the same month of the year led to their unification as a common feast.

In all scriptural sources, the Feast of Passover is linked to the moment of the liberation of the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage. The fact that the history of the Jewish people has always been marked by divine interventions gives the Feast of Passover an extremely important role in the history of Jewish salvation, being a celebration of God's victory for the chosen people¹⁴.

The Feast of Weeks (Qasir)

The Feast of Weeks (*Qasir*), or Harvest, is the second annual Jewish holiday, linked to the agricultural harvest season. The holiday was celebrated seven weeks after the "cutting of the ears of corn" (the Feast of Unleavened Bread). As an agricultural holiday, it is a time of rejoicing, and a characteristic ritual of the holiday is the offering of two loaves of leavened dough as an offering to Yahweh.

The celebration of this feast in the third month of the year is linked to the time of Yahweh's covenant with the people of Israel on Mount Sinai, and later in Christianity the coincidence of the Feast of the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the same time with the Jewish Feast of Weeks was interpreted as a fulfilment of God's New Covenant with all humanity, a covenant in which Christ is the intermediary¹⁵.

The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot)

The Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) is the third major Jewish holiday to appear in the biblical books, and is among the oldest events on the religious

¹⁴ Dumitru ABRUDAN, Emilian CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, pp. 313-318; R. DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento...*, p. 455; Petre SEMEN, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate*, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2008, pp. 249-251; Mihai Valentin VLADIMIRESCU, *Viața de zi cu zi în vremea lui Iisus*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2013, pp. 245-246.

¹⁵ D. ABRUDAN, Em. CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică...*, pp. 318-319; R. DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento...*, p. 456; P. SEMEN, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate...*, pp. 251-252; M. V. VLADIMIRESCU, *Viața de zi cu zi în vremea lui Iisus...*, p. 246.

calendar. The feast is explicitly mentioned in Leviticus 23, 33-44, and is celebrated for seven days with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where on the eighth day animal sacrifices, especially of bulls, take place. The date of the celebration is controversial, but according to the information in Leviticus and Numbers, it appears to be celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month of the year.

According to Jewish tradition, the Feast of Tabernacles involved living for seven days under the tent roof, in remembrance of the period of Israel's journey into the desert as a nomadic people, during which time the Jews lived in tents. The feast also coincides with a period of agricultural harvests and is associated, in a way, with the construction of tents for gathering agricultural produce¹⁶.

The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)

The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) is one of the holidays celebrated with much pomp by the Jews, dating back to the post-exilic period. The date of the feast appears in the biblical writings on 10 Tishri (September-October) (Leviticus 23, 27-32 and Numbers 29, 7-11). The ritual of the Day of Atonement involved two animal sacrifices: a bull and a goat. The high priest of the Temple sprinkled the blood of the bull on the altar in front of the veil that housed the Holy of Holies, an act that symbolized the sacrifice for personal sins, and the sacrifice of the goat was performed in the same manner on behalf of the people, for the forgiveness of sins. A second goat, called the "goat for Azazel", was used in the ritual, on whose head the high priest laid his hands to "pass on" the sins of the people and which was then released into the depths of the desert to carry the sins of the community as far as possible.

A similar ritual is attested in Babylon, but the specificity of the Jewish Day of Atonement is represented by "Azazel's goat", where *āzā'zel* denotes the abyss into which the sins of the people are carried, because the impurity of the animal does not allow it to be offered as a sacrifice to Yahweh, being removed to the desert¹⁷.

¹⁶ D. ABRUDAN, Em. CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică...*, pp. 319-321; R. DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento...*, p. 457; P. SEMEN, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate...*, pp. 252-254; M. V. VLADIMIRESCU, *Viața de zi cu zi în vremea lui Iisus...*, p. 247.

¹⁷ D. ABRUDAN, Em. CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică...*, pp. 323-327; R. DE VAUX,

Hanukka

The feast of *Hanukkah* is a holiday established during the Maccabean period and is described in the book of I Maccabees 4, 36-59. The feast is related to the historical episode in which the Temple in Jerusalem is desecrated by King Antiochus IV Epiphanes on 25 December (Kislev) 167 BC by offering sacrifices to Zeus. Three years after this, on 25 December 164 BC, the Temple in Jerusalem is cleansed by Judas Maccabeus after a victorious battle and so the feast came to be celebrated every year.

The feast lasts for eight days, during which time instead of bloody sacrifices, people go to the Temple with green branches and sing hymns, a time of great rejoicing. Candles are also lit in front of houses in remembrance of the cleansing of the altar and the lighting of the candles by Judas Maccabeus. For this reason, the feast is also called “Feast of Lights”¹⁸.

Purim

The establishment of Purim is based on a historical event that took place during the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon, an episode in which the Persian ruler Haman is defeated by the Jew Mordecai with the help of his niece Esther. The feast is celebrated on 14 and 15 Adar (February/March) with great joy, after fasting on 13 Adar. The name of the feast is derived from the word *pur*, meaning “lots”, indicating the method Haman used to determine the date of the extermination of the Jews. The etymology of the word, however, is of Akkadian origin, from *puru*, which translates as “fate”.

On the feast days, people go to the synagogue, where the book of Esther is read, followed by a banquet that has become profane over time, during which blessing formulas are pronounced for the heroes Mordecai

Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento..., p. 458; P. SEMEN, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate...*, pp. 256-259; M. V. VLADIMIRESCU, *Viața de zi cu zi în vremea lui Iisus...*, pp. 246-247.

¹⁸ D. ABRUDAN, Em. CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică...*, pp. 328-329; R. DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento...*, p. 458.

and Esther, and curses are pronounced on Haman. Purim has turned into a Jewish carnival, thanks to the joyful manifestations taken to extremes¹⁹.

Celebrating the New Year

Alongside these feasts, attested in the books of the Old Testament, there is also a New Year's feast, called *Rosh ha-Shana* in the early Christian era, but nowhere to be found in the Bible. However, mentions of a New Year's celebration are found in Leviticus 23, 24-25 and Numbers 29, 1-6. The first day of the seventh month is identified as the first day of the year, with the month of Tishri further celebrated with feasts such as the Day of Atonement (10) and the Feast of Tabernacles (15-22)²⁰.

IV. Instead of conclusions

The calendar of the Jewish religious holidays was particularly enriched in the post-exilic period, and the holidays mentioned above are only the most important ones, which remain in use today. To these have been added other feast days, but they have no biblical basis for religious authority. The importance of the Jewish feasts lies in the introduction of the sacrificial rite into their celebration, establishing a definite spiritual relationship between the feast and the practice of worship.

¹⁹ D. ABRUDAN, Em. CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică...*, pp. 327-328; R. DE VAUX, *Le istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento...*, p. 459; P. SEMEN, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate...*, pp. 259-260.

²⁰ D. ABRUDAN, Em. CORNIȚESCU, *Arheologie biblică...*, pp. 322-323; P. SEMEN, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate...*, p. 256.