

WAS EZRA A HIGH PRIEST?

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The books of Ezra and Nehemiah detail the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. These books feature Ezra the Scribe as a religious leader of the fledging Jewish community in Jerusalem. He is introduced in the Tanakh with the following genealogical lineage:

*Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest*¹ . . . (Ezra 7:1-5).

This passage traces Ezra's descent all the way back to Aaron, the first high priest (kohen gadol). Nonetheless, rabbinic tradition teaches that Ezra himself was not a high priest. Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 list all those exiles who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. Ezra's name is conspicuously absent from this list because he only returned to Jerusalem later, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7-8),² one year after the Holy Temple had been rebuilt. TB *Megillah* 16b notes Ezra's absence during the early days of the restored Temple and asks why he did not leave Babylon earlier. The Talmud then explains that Ezra did not want to leave Babylon while his teacher, Baruch ben Neriah, was still alive; he therefore had to wait until Baruch's death before leaving for Jerusalem. The Midrash adds the following to this talmudic discussion:

The Temple was actually consecrated because Ezra did not arrive at the time, for had Ezra arrived then, Satan would have filed accusations against the Jews, arguing that Ezra would better serve as high priest than Jeshua ben Jehozadak. This is because even though Jeshua ben Jehozadak would have been a high priest son of a high priest, Ezra was more righteous than he (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 5:2).³

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This discussion clearly establishes the classic rabbinic position that it was not Ezra but his brother's son Jeshua who served as high priest (see I Chron. 5:40, which states that Jehozadak was a son of Seraiah, Ezra's father). This is also implied in the list of high priests in Nehemiah 12:10-11, all of whom were lineal male descendants of Jeshua ben Jehozadak.

However, when tracing the transmission of the Masorah (chain of tradition), Maimonides (Rambam) mentions the rabbinical court of Ezra, known as the "Men of the Great Assembly",⁴ and notes that the last of these sages was Simeon the Just, whom he describes as the high priest some time after Ezra.⁵ This seems to imply that Maimonides understood Ezra to have been a high priest.⁶ Rabbi Menahem Meiri (1249-c. 1316) echoes the words of Maimonides and adds that Ezra was the first high priest of the Second Temple.⁷ Thus, Maimonides and Meiri assume that Ezra had indeed served as high priest. In fact, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (Hida; 1724-1806) relates that he found a manuscript of Maimonides to that effect. In this manuscript, Maimonides observes that he compared his Torah text with an ancient Torah scroll in France written by Ezra the high priest.⁸ Azulai infers that Maimonides believed that Ezra was indeed a high priest, in consonance with his opinion above. Elsewhere, Azulai questions the position of Maimonides in light of the aforementioned midrash which states that Jeshua, not Ezra, was the high priest.⁹

Rabbi Ya'akov Emden (Yavetz; 1697-1776) writes that Maimonides' source is Tractate *Parah* (3:5) of the Mishnah,¹⁰ which records all historical instances of preparing a red heifer (*parah adumah*) for use in purification:

Who prepared them? Moses did so first; Ezra, the second; and after Ezra five more were prepared according to Rabbi Meir. The Sages say that seven more were done from Ezra's time onward. Who prepared them? Simeon the Just and Johanan the high priest each prepared two. Elyehoena ben Hakkuf, Hanamel the Egyptian, and Yishmael ben Piavi each did one.

By mentioning Ezra in conjunction with the other high priests who prepared red heifers (Emden reasons), the Mishnah seems to imply that Ezra, too, was a high priest. This idea gains support from the view that the red heifer might only be prepared by the high priest (see *Parah* 4:1). Emden then notes that even according to the opinion that any *kohen* may prepare a red

heifer, each *parah adumah* would still have been known historically by the name of the serving *kohen gadol*, not by the name of the *kohen* who actually prepared it.¹¹ Thus, since the Mishnah mentions a red heifer prepared by Ezra, the implication is that Ezra was indeed the high priest.

R. Emden concedes, however, that from a simple reading of the Tanakh it is evident that Jeshua ben Jehozadak was the *kohen gadol*, not Ezra, and that the succession was in a direct line through his male descendants for generations. In order to defend Maimonides' position, Emden goes on to suggest that Ezra functioned as high priest only while Jeshua's son or grandson was still too young or while Jeshua or one of his descendants was temporarily disqualified from performing the high priest's duties owing to ritual impurity. One must therefore assume that Ezra served for a very short time in this capacity because the Talmud (TB *Yoma* 9a) does not list Ezra among the righteous high priests of the Second Temple whose merit entitled them to long service.¹²

Rabbi Avraham Zacuto (1452-1515) explicitly disagrees with Maimonides and contends that Ezra was never high priest, despite being the most prominent *kohen* of his generation.¹³ Rabbi Shim'on ben Tzemah Duran (1361-1444) likewise affirms that Ezra was not a high priest. Yet by citing the aforementioned Mishnah to prove that Simeon the Just lived after Ezra,¹⁴ Duran evidently fails to understand that it contradicts his earlier assertion that Ezra was not a *kohen gadol*. This can be explained by an idea that Hida (Azulai) proposed. He writes¹⁵ that Ezra defined his generation, because he was the leading Torah scholar and prophet¹⁶ of his time. The Mishnah is therefore justified in stating that Ezra prepared the red heifer, simply because this was done during his lifetime, even though he himself was not the high priest, but it does not provide support for the notion that Ezra functioned as the *kohen gadol*.

Rabbi Hayyim Palache (1788-1869) rejects the whole idea that Maimonides considered Ezra to have been a high priest and explains that Rambam had something entirely different in mind.¹⁷ He simply meant that Simeon the Just was high priest some time after the era of Ezra's leadership and then became the nation's leader as well. According to Palache, Maimonides never meant to imply that Ezra served as *kohen gadol* and that Simeon the Just later succeeded him in that office. However, this explanation does not account for the

words of Meiri, who stated explicitly that Ezra was the first high priest of the Second Temple. According to Palache, the term “*kohen gadol*” in this context should not be taken to mean literally “high priest” but “great *kohen*”. In fact, notes Palache, *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 1:8 maintains that had Aaron lived in Ezra’s time, Ezra would have been greater than Aaron. Furthermore, the Talmud declares (TB *Sanhedrin* 21a) that Ezra was so great that he could have received the Torah instead of Moses, had he preceded him chronologically. Palache asserts that because Meiri was only writing a historical account of the Masorah, he did not strive to make it clear that Ezra was not in fact a high priest. (This point is hard to accept, because great care and precision are needed in the recording of history; Palache, however, seems to think otherwise.) In his opinion, no one claimed that Simeon the Just actually succeeded Ezra as high priest, since many generations elapsed between them. All that the writers meant was that Simeon the Just eventually became heir to the legacy of Ezra.

Although some authorities believed that Ezra once served as high priest, this seems to contradict the plain meaning of the biblical text. Most authorities do not see Ezra in that role, and even Maimonides is ambiguous at best on this issue. From the standpoint of Jewish history and tradition, Ezra’s achievements in strengthening Jewish life and rejuvenating Torah study far overshadow anything to do with his priestly status.¹⁸

NOTES

1. The holder of the title “chief priest” in this context is ambiguous; it could refer to Aaron, Ezra’s ancestor, or to Ezra himself. In the KJV and the JPS Bible, *kohen gadol* is always translated as “high priest” and *kohen ha-rosh* as “chief priest.” However, Ibn Ezra (to Psalms 99:6) refers to Aaron as *ha-kohen ha-rosh*. In the Apocrypha, Ezra (Esdras) is explicitly referred to as the “chief priest” (Esdras 9:40, 49). See A. Kahane, *Ha-Sefarim ha-Hitzonim* (Jerusalem, 1970) pp. 425-6 (Hebrew), who refers to Ezra in those instances as *kohen ha-rosh*. Furthermore, it is unclear what the meaning of *kohen ha-rosh* is and whether it means the same as *kohen gadol*. The term *kohen gadol* appears many times in the Tanakh: Lev. 21:10; Num. 35:25, 35:28; Josh. 20:6; II Kgs. 12:11, 22:4, 22:8, 23:4; Haggai 1:1, 1:12, 1:14, 2:1, 2:2, 2:4; Zech. 3:1, 3:8, 6:11; Neh. 3:1, 13:28; and II Chron. 34:9 (which essentially paraphrases II Kgs. 23:4). The term (*ha-kohen ha-rosh*, however, only appears in the books of Ezra and Chronicles, i.e., Ezra 7:5; II Chron. 19:11, 24:11, 26:20, 31:10. In I Chron. 27:5, Benaiah ben Jehoiada is referred to as *ha-kohen rosh*. Rashi comments that although some maintain that he was the high priest, this opinion must be rejected since Zadok and Abiathar held that office during the reigns of David and

Solomon. R. David Kimḥi (1160-1235), in his commentary, explains that the title *kohen ha-rosh* was not applied to Benaiah but rather to his father, Jehoiada. Jehoiada is mentioned in I Chron. 12:28 as “prince of [the house of] Aaron” and Kimḥi explains that this means that he was the high priest. Rashi, commenting on II Chron. 24:11, explains that “*kohen ha-rosh*” means associate high priest. The only other occurrence of the term, besides Ezra and Chronicles, is in II Kings 25:18, where Seraiah is titled *kohen ha-rosh* and Zephaniah is styled *kohen mishneh* (lit., “secondary priest”). Here Kimḥi explains that *kohen ha-rosh* refers to the high priest and *kohen mishneh* to his assistant. No explanation is given by Rashi. Thus, even if “chief priest” in this context alludes to Ezra, not Aaron, this does not necessarily imply that Ezra was the high priest.

2. Rashi (in his commentary to Ezra 7:7 and to TB *Megillah* 16b) identifies Artaxerxes with Darius II. Here, Rashi follows the classic rabbinic interpretation (see TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 3b) that this Persian king is known by three different names: Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes.

3. Rashi (I Chron. 5:41) also observes that Ezra did not become high priest because Jeshua arrived in Jerusalem long before him. Elsewhere, Rashi writes (I Chron. 24:1) that Ezra did not become high priest because his father, Seraiah, was not the firstborn son of Azariah, the *kohen gadol*. Seraiah’s older brother Jehozadak was the firstborn, and it was therefore Jehozadak’s son, Jeshua, who inherited the position of high priest. See the responsa of R. Yosef Hazzan, *Hikrei Lev on Orat Hayyim*, vol. 1 (Salonika, 1787) p. 42, dealing with priority in the succession of high priests on the basis of this discussion.

4. Introduction to *Mishneh Torah*.

5. See S. Buber, *Sha’arei Tziyyon* (Jaroslaw, 1845) p. 15, where R. Isaac Immanuel de Lattes (16th cent., Italy) is said to have declared that Ezra was the first high priest of the Second Temple and that Simeon the Just succeeded him. However, De Lattes contradicted himself, because on p. 20 he writes that Ezra, the first high priest, was succeeded by Jeshua ben Jehozadak. See also *Nahalat Avot* (New York City: Zilberman, 1953) p. 51, in which R. Isaac Abrabanel (1437-1508) wrote that Simeon the Just was the son of Jeshua ben Jehozadak, the implying that the latter succeeded the former. He also claimed that Ezra was a son of Jehozadak, making him Jeshua’s brother. Both statements are obviously erroneous and run counter to explicit passages in the Tanakh.

6. In the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides also declares that Simeon the Just, a high priest, was the last of the “Men of the Great Assembly.” However, Maimonides does not say that Ezra preceded him as the high priest. This apparently gives rise to a contradiction in Maimonides’ position. One can nevertheless argue that since his *Commentary on the Mishnah* was written many years before his *Mishneh Torah*, he must have adopted the view that Ezra was a *kohen gadol* some time later, after initially rejecting it. Indeed, Meiri, who traditionally follows the opinions of Maimonides, did express the same opinion (see below). Similarly, R. Ovadyah of Bertinoro (15th cent., Italy) wrote in his commentary to the Mishnah (*Avot* 1:2) that Simeon the Just was the high priest after Ezra. His commentary usually consists of abridgments of Rashi and Maimonides. Thus, Bertinoro also seems to believe that Maimonides held Ezra to have been a high priest.

7. B. Z. Prague, ed., *Beit ha-Behirah – Avot* (Jerusalem: Yad Ha-Rav Herzog, 1963) p. 19.

8. M. M. Kregel, *Shem Ha-Gedolim* (Krakow, 1905) p. 164.

9. H. Y. D. Azulai, *Kikar la-Aden* (Livorno, 1801) p. 146.

10. Y. Emden, *Lehem Shamayim*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem, 1958) p. 137.

11. See Numbers 19:3-4, where Eleazar was commanded to prepare the red heifer, even though Aaron, his father, was the high priest. The Talmud (TB *Yoma* 42b) explains that although some held that a red heifer might only be prepared by the high priest, there was a special scriptural imperative that transferred the right of preparing the first red heifer from Aaron to Eleazar; all future red heifers were to be prepared by the *kohen gadol*. The opinion that any *kohen* can prepare a red heifer derives this notion from that fact that the first red heifer was prepared by Eleazar, not his father, Aaron the high priest. According to this opinion, one must explain that even though Eleazar prepared the first red heifer, Moses is said to have done so because (according to TB *Zevahim* 102a) he, like his brother Aaron, had the halakhic status of a high priest. The fact that the Mishnah speaks of a red heifer being prepared by Ezra shows that Ezra was indeed a *kohen gadol*. This is the reasoning behind Emden's analysis.

12. See Hayyim Kanievsky, *Be-Sha'ar ha-Melekh* (Bnei Berak, 1960) p. 17, and *Kiryat Melekh* (Bnei Brak, 1978) p. 8, where Kanievsky deduces from the same mishnah in *Parah* that Ezra was indeed a high priest. He then asks how this can be reconciled with the aforementioned midrash, which states that Jeshua ben Jehozadak was the *kohen gadol*, not Ezra. His answer is that perhaps, after Jeshua or one of his descendants died, Ezra replaced him. Here R. Kanievsky differs slightly from Emden, but they both conclude for the same reason that Ezra could have only been high priest for a short period of time.

13. H. Filipowski, *Sefer Yuhasin ha-Shalem* (London, 1857) p. 11.

14. Y. Fischl, *Magen Avot* (Leipzig, 1855) p. 4.

15. Azulai, *Petaḥ Einayim*, vol. 2 (Livorno, 1790) p. 92.

16. Azulai apparently assumes that Ezra was a prophet because TB *Megillah* 15a identifies Ezra with Malachi. However, TB *Megillah* 14a notes that there were only 48 prophets. Now whatever method one adopts to count these 48 *nevi'im* (see Rashi, Rabbenu Hananel, *Haggahot Ha-Bah, Haggahot Ha-Gra, Seder ha-Dorot* Year 2442), Malachi is included and Ezra is not. This approach is not accepted by Maimonides, who lists Ezra and Malachi as separate people when tracing the transmission of the Masorah. See Kanievsky, *Be-Sha'ar ha-Melekh*, p. 18, where he writes that Maimonides rejected the opinion mentioned in the Talmud that Ezra and Malachi were one and the same.

17. H. Palache, *Beit Avot* (Salonika, 1821) p. 8.

18. See, for example, Ezra's *takkanot* as described in TB *Bava Kamma* 82a-b and *Megillah* 31b.



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