



The Men of the Great Assembly

Preparing the Way for the Messiah

by Tim Kelley

For many Christians, the culture of the 1st century Jewish people is of little concern - “after all, once Christ died for our sins, the Jewish people were no longer God’s people as He is now focusing His attention on Plan B – the Church”. . . at least, that’s what many have been taught. Continuing with that line of reasoning, there would be no need or desire to try to determine why the majority of Jewish people of that day rejected His claim to be the Messiah since they would go down in the annals of history as the generation that “killed” Christ.

Yet the words of the Messiah as well as that of his disciples tell a different story . . . a story that lines up with that of the prophets, a story of redemption and salvation for the Hebrew people and those Gentiles who will join with them. For those of us who see the scriptures this way, and who want to help others to see it as well, it’s important that we do understand that culture so we can better explain the words penned by the men of that day, who like us – were expecting the Messiah to return in their lifetime.

That culture began with the Babylonian captivity and continued through the intertestamental period that began shortly after the Temple was rebuilt and ended with the birth of John the Baptist. It was during that 400 year period of Jewish history that we see the birth of the synagogue – the place where Yeshua and His disciples spent much of their time – the place from which they “turned the world upside down”¹.

This message isn’t about the synagogue, but rather about the men who helped form the backbone of the Jewish culture into which our Messiah was born.

As the Babylonian captivity drew to a close, God called Zerubbabel to lead the first wave of Jewish exiles to return to Judea and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Roughly 60 years later, a second wave returned, this time to rebuild the walls of the city. It was during that time that those who had returned seemingly left their Hebrewness back in Bablylon. Like their northern tribe brothers who had turned their back on God and His Torah, the Jews in Judea and Samaria were doing the same. Apparently, without a king, and without the institutional structure provided by the Temple and the sacrifices, they were left dangling – with nothing to draw them together as a people. If something wasn’t done, they – like their northern tribe brothers – would cease to exist as a people.

To remedy that situation, God sent Ezra and Nehemiah to lead them back to God. Ezra understood what the people needed . . . teachers to show them the Torah and to teach its application, thus it says that –

^{NKJ} **Ezra 7:10** . . . Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

According to tradition, one of the vehicles by which he was able to begin rebuilding the hearts of the Jewish people was through the establishment of a legislative body called the “Anshei Knesset HaGadolah” (אַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה) or the “Men of the Great Assembly”. The Great Knesset, or “synagogue” in Greek, was a body whose sole purpose was to restore what it meant to be a Jew. Its 120 members included the leaders of that day including some of the prophets – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, other notable men such as Mordechai - the hero of the Esther story and Zerubbabel – the leader of the first wave of Jews who returned to the land. Ezra and Nehemiah were included in its numbers as well.

¹ Acts 17:6

Ezra's authority to build such a body more than likely came from the Torah –

^{NKJ} **Numbers 11:16-17** So the LORD said to Moses: "Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you. "Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone.

This, of course, was the pattern for the Sanhedrin in Moses' day. It appears that Ezra took that pattern, and expanded it from 70 to 120 men. Though history does not bear out why he increased the assembly beyond that prescribed by Moses, it is assumed that he included those who signed the covenant mentioned in Nehemiah 9:38 – 10:27 as well as the prophets mentioned in Nehemiah 6:7. Ezra was then chosen to be the "nassi" (נָשִׂיאַ – Str. 5387) or leader of it.

Ezra's main goal was to restore Torah observance to the land and turn the people once again to the Temple. He did so by enacting laws that would bring conformity to the observance of the Torah. Examples of these laws include a 1/3 shekel "Temple" tax –

^{NKJ} **Nehemiah 10:32** Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:

and the closing the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath.

^{NKJ} **Nehemiah 13:19** So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted *some* of my servants at the gates, so *that* no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day.

Though these laws are attributed to Ezra himself, it's assumed he enacted them on behalf of the Men of the Great Assembly. It's interesting to note that these decrees, though based on Torah instructions², are not defined in the Torah and could thus be considered "halachic decisions" or "oral traditions". We'll see more on that later.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah give little information about this legislative body, in fact it is never mentioned by name. Instead, all historical records are found in the Talmud, and the various accounts are sometimes in conflict with each other. Never-the-less, these accounts indicate that the Men of the Great Assembly were responsible for the following institutions within Judaism.

Canonization of the Bible -

Before the time of Ezra, the Jewish people had preserved various manuscripts of the Torah, Psalms, Writings, and Prophets along with hundreds of other "holy" manuscripts. The Men of the Great Assembly took it upon themselves to compile these writings into one book. This was not an easy task. Each manuscript had to be judged based on a number of qualifications including authenticity and references to them by previous kings and prophets. In some cases, the writings of the individual prophets had to be gathered together so as to make a complete prophecy, then they had to decide if those prophecies were valid for all time. Thus they are attributed with the compilation of these prophetic books: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

There was also the question of whether books written outside the land (Ezekiel, Daniel, and Esther), or those of the current day prophets (Haggai, Zecharia, Malachi – all members of the Assembly) should be included in the cannon.

² Exodus 30:11-16; Exodus 20:10

Once they decided which books and manuscripts to include, they divided the canon into three groups – 1) the Torah (instructions/law), 2) the Neviim (prophets), and 3) the Ketuvim (the writings). These three groups make up the acronym “TeNaKh” which is what the Jewish people call their “bible” and what Christians consider “the Old Testament”.

Did they make the correct decisions? We can assume they did since the Bible recognized by the first century Jewish people, as well as by the Messiah himself, is the same as what they came up with. In regards to the scriptures, Yeshua made this statement after His resurrection –

^{NKJ} **Luke 24:44** Then He said to them, "These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me."

By making this statement, Yeshua indirectly gave a stamp of approval to the Bible as it was known in that day.

Formalized Prayer –

Standardized prayer was another achievement of the Great Assembly. Though it's believed that the prayers probably began in Babylon, credit for ordering and editing them into a standardized form is given to the men of the Great Assembly. During the captivity, the Jewish people were unable to assemble on the festival days and thus lost the sense of community that comes when people gather together at set times throughout the year. In an attempt to bring the people together again, the Jewish leadership began the traditions of Friday evening Kiddush and Sabbath evening Havdalah. They also formulated the universal prayer service with the Shmoneh Esreh (the Amidah) as the centerpiece of the service. These standardized prayers, along with others from the scriptures, were intended to bring the people together for worship in much the same way as the sacrifices at the Temple had done before. They based their theory on the words of the prophet Hosea -

^{NKJ} **Hosea 14:2** Take words with you, And return to the LORD. Say to Him, "Take away all iniquity; Receive *us* graciously, For we will offer the sacrifices of our lips.

When the people returned to the Land, it would be expected that those who lived in Jerusalem attend the daily worship services at the Temple, The ruling of the Assembly provided a way by which those who lived outside Jerusalem could participate in a local unified worship service on a daily or weekly basis as well. While not as beneficial as attending the daily worship services at the Temple, it never-the-less drew the people together as a body.

Creating an Educational System -

Quoting again the prophet Hosea, we see why God's people are scattered and destroyed –

^{NKJ} **Hosea 4:6** My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

It was their rejection of God's way that ultimately lead to the captivity of Ephraim – the northern tribes. Ezra and the Assembly did not want that to happen to Judah as well. Thus they created, or at least revitalized, the synagogue system. Along with the prayers, the standardized Torah and Haftara readings became a part of the weekly synagogue service that kept the people focused on God's law.

Like church buildings in early American culture, the synagogue became the center of social life. The Jewish people would not only meet on the Sabbath, they would come during the week for more intense study of the scripture. It became the “school house” for all things Jewish.

Other Achievements -

Along with what's noted above, the Men of the Great Assembly are credited with the creation of the standardized calendar. By calculating the time from one new moon to the next, they created a hybrid solar/lunar calendar that would keep the yearly festivals in their seasons. Though later confirmed with sightings, it kept the people who lived in cities far from Jerusalem in sync with those who lived in Jerusalem.

The Assembly was also credited with standardizing the day on which Purim was celebrated. Though that day is recorded in the book of Esther³, it is believed that the date was determined while Mordechai was a member of the assembly.

Though they are not given credit for such, it could be said that Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly set the foundations for the rabbinic Judaism of the 1st century. With their focus on the synagogue as well as the Temple, they began to shift the worship and Torah study away from the Temple and the priests and toward the local synagogues and those who would later become the Jewish sages. Their motto seems to have been –

“ . . . Be cautious in judgment. Establish many pupils. And make a safety fence around the Torah. (Mishnah Tractate Avot -1)⁴

In his decree to close the city gates on the Sabbath, and his institution of the 1/3 shekel “Temple Tax”, Ezra did indeed place “fences around the Torah”. This is precisely what the Pharisees did when they come on the scene nearly 300 years later. Did they derive their inspiration from the earlier institution? Probably so.

As an example of how Ezra's fences were later adopted by the Pharisees, let's look at his Temple Tax decree, which I believe later morphed into the tax mentioned in Matthew 17:24 – 27.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 17:24-27** When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the *temple* tax came to Peter and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the *temple* tax?" ²⁵ He said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" ²⁶ Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ²⁷

"Nevertheless, **lest we offend them**, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you."

There was apparently a question among the Jews of His day whether the atonement money spoken of in Exodus 30 was a one-time tax, a once in a lifetime tax, a yearly tax, or even a tax at all. Based on the assumption that Peter answered “yes” due to him seeing Yeshua pay it at some previous time, it appears that by the first century it was considered to be a yearly tax. It's possible that the sages had taken Ezra's 1/3 shekel tax that was collected solely for the purpose of the Temple and combined it with the 1/2 shekel atonement money of Exodus 30 to give it more legitimacy. Though Yeshua clearly believed the requirement to pay the yearly tax was optional - a “halachic decision” and was therefore non-binding, He never-the-less paid it in order to avoid causing offense. Though not really a “fence” around the Torah, this is an example where Yeshua observed the oral tradition.

The Men of the Great Assembly was a rather short lived institution. By most accounts, it lasted from 410 BCE to 312 BCE, just a little over 100 years. It's believed that when members died off, they were never

³ Esther 9:19

⁴ http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682498/jewish/English-Text.htm

replaced. Though this body shared just a brief moment in Jewish history, it made a lasting impact on the institutions that the Jewish people held dear in the 1st century and even today. Their focus on the dissemination of Torah knowledge to the people set the stage for the rise of Pharisee Judaism and a system that Yeshua used to train His own disciples and send them out to the world. What's more, their support for the synagogue system empowered the people to build synagogues throughout the land of Israel and into the surrounding nations. It was in those synagogues that Yeshua and His disciples found their audience and spread the gospel of the restoration of the Kingdom throughout the world.

Like the Maccabean revolt that preserved the Jewish people from assimilating into the Greek culture, the Men of the Great Assembly helped rebuild the Jewish culture after the Babylonian captivity and played a big part in preparing the way for the coming of the King of the Jews – Messiah Yeshua.

Shalom Alecheim

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