

# Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism

## Introduction

The origin of any religious movement often appears fairly straightforward on the surface, especially if a charismatic individual or shape-changing event is involved, but more and more complex as one digs below the surface. In the case of Jewish origins there is such an event, the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 B.C. But as we look further into it, we come up against the issue of continuity-discontinuity, whether in terms of the object of worship, adherence to narrative and legal traditions, religious institutions (priesthood, prophecy, etc.), social organization below the level of the ruling power, or even demographics. Since the early-modern period, discussion of this cluster of issues has been clouded by prejudicial theological and philosophical assumptions. Since the story has often been told, one or two examples will suffice. At one end of a broad spectrum of opinion are those biblical scholars and theologians during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, and residually thereafter, who brought to bear on their reading of the Old Testament theories of historical development prevalent in the intellectual milieu of the time. Many of these held university positions in Germany, the great heartland of theology and biblical studies, and the name which first comes to mind is that of Julius Wellhausen, whose *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (1883)<sup>1</sup> set the agenda for the study of the Old Testament for a century. Part romantic,

1. Translated into English by J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies under the title *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (1957; repr. SBL Reprints and Translations. Atlanta: Scholars, 1994). This publication includes a reprint of Wellhausen's article on "Israel" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

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