



**A Sage  
in  
New Haven**

Essays on the Prophets,  
the Writings, and  
the Ancient World  
in Honor of Robert R. Wilson

Edited by Alison Acker Gruseke  
and Carolyn J. Sharp



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# ÄGYPTEN UND ALTES TESTAMENT

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Herausgegeben von Stefan Jakob Wimmer und Wolfgang Zwickel

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Illustration on the cover: Orthostat, Bit-Hilani IV, Zinjirli (Sam'al), 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.  
Musicians playing frame drums at a banquet of King Bar-Rakib.  
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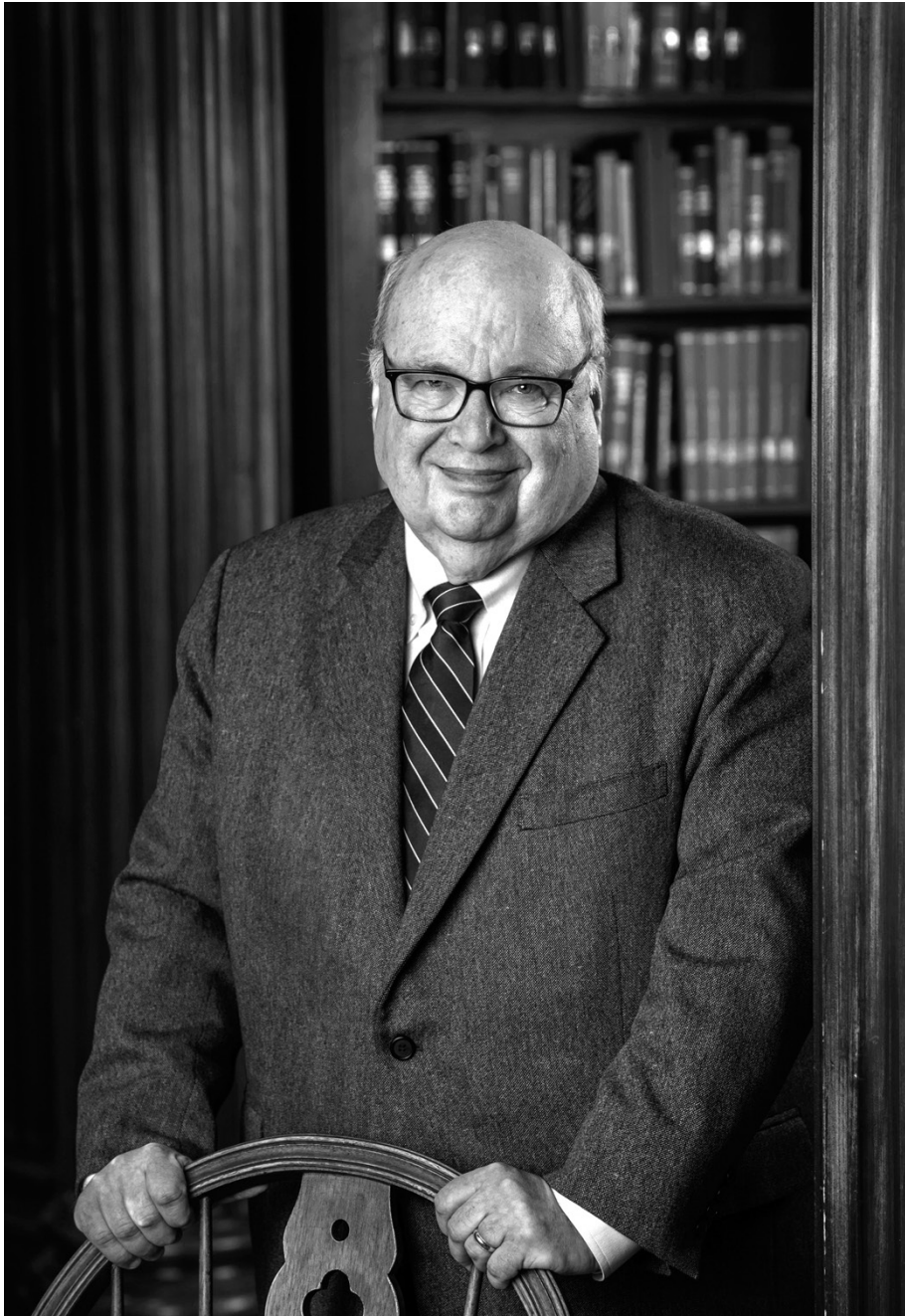
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Robert R. Wilson at Yale Divinity School in February 2020.  
Photograph by Mara Lavitt.





## Preface

Alison Acker Gruseke and Carolyn J. Sharp

Professor Robert R. Wilson, Yale University's Hooper Professor emeritus of Religious Studies and Professor emeritus of Old Testament, is an unforgettable presence—teacher, colleague, friend, and mentor extraordinaire, he is a celebrated scholar whose research on the Hebrew Bible and its world have enriched countless students, scholars, and clergy who have had the good fortune to study with him. Wry, wise, and intellectually generous, Bob Wilson consistently offers readers and listeners alike a combination of methodological acuity, deep scholarly insight, and a subtle invitation to consider the many ways in which the Bible and its scholarship matter for the present moment. Perhaps above all, and in keeping with scholarship's finest traditions, Bob Wilson is a master of the incisive question. "Can you say more about that?" is a question he has used with pedagogical deftness throughout his career, welcoming students to develop and articulate their ideas more clearly. His keen curiosity is evident, of course, in Bob's own written work, which spans the corpora of the Hebrew Bible as well as the cultures, history, and societies of ancient Western Asia.

The idea for this new *Festschrift* in honor of Bob Wilson's five-decade career emerged during the 2019–2020 academic year, Bob's final year of full-time teaching at Yale. Both editors of the present volume had been his students there and were aware of a broad community of scholars, some trained by Bob and others who had encountered him in various academic capacities, who would wish to contribute to a volume celebrating him. The range of subjects reflected in this collection captures the principal areas of Bob's own work and teaching: biblical prophecy and the societies, languages, and cultures of the ancient world. A spirit of enthusiastic engagement percolated among the contributors and was best summed up in the response by one senior scholar to our invitation to join the project: "Honored to be asked and eager to participate!" The essays arrived on our desks and now are presented here in a beautiful volume created by Kai Metzler at Zaphon, a major publisher for scholarship on the Bible and ancient Western Asia. We express our sincere gratitude to Dr. Metzler for his expert work on the production of this volume and to the two editors of the *Ägypten und Altes Testament* series, Stefan Jakob Wimmer and Wolfgang Zwickel, for accepting *A Sage in New Haven* in that important series. Anyone familiar with our honoree's interest in music will readily understand how Susan Ackerman's photograph of drummers at Zinjirli (see her essay, "Battle Horns and Frame Drums," in this volume) inspired our use of the image that appears on the front cover.

Finally, the librarians and library staffs at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Williams College, and Yale University—as well as the libraries where the contributors to this volume undertook their research—deserve our warm gratitude. Without libraries there are no books, and when, due to circumstances no one could have predicted, the world's libraries were forced radically to alter the ways in which they interacted with patrons, our libraries did everything possible to keep the world of ideas afloat. We thank them.

Alison Acker Gruseke  
Carolyn J. Sharp



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# Ezra the Scribe and the (Purported) Origins of Targum <sup>1</sup>

Steven D. Fraade

## 1. Introduction: The Biblical Ezra as Scribe

When, in particular, was the beginning of the translation of the holy tongue of Hebrew as Scripture into the vernacular of Aramaic as targum? A central figure, according to one such account, is the priest and scribe Ezra, who, according to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, was known for his authoritative expertise in and teaching of the Torah's laws. In Ezra 7:6 he is identified by the "title" of והוא־סֵפֶר מְהִיר (‘‘A scribe expert in the Teaching (*tôrâ*) of Moses which the LORD God of Israel had given,’’ NJPS).<sup>2</sup> Some modern critical scholars, like their ancient rabbinic predecessors, identify the founding event of scriptural translation, under Ezra's direction, with the narrative of Nehemiah 7:72–8:8, in which he plays the central role of reader and expositor (directing the Levites), which warrants citation and translation at length:

וַיָּגַע הַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעָרֵיהֶם: <sup>1</sup>וַיֵּאָסְפוּ כָּל־הָעָם כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד אֶל־הַרְחוֹב אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר־הַמַּיִם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְעֹזְרָא הַסֹּפֵר לְהִבִּיא אֶת־סֵפֶר תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל: <sup>2</sup>וַיָּבִיא עֹזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה לִפְנֵי הַקְּהָל מֵאִישׁ וְעַד־אִשָּׁה וְכָל מְבִין לִשְׁמֹעַ בַּיּוֹם אֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי: <sup>3</sup>וַיִּקְרָא־בּו לִפְנֵי הַרְחוֹב אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר־הַמַּיִם מִן־הָאֹר עַד־מִחְצִית הַיּוֹם נֹגֵד הָאָנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׂים וְהַמְּבִינִים וְאֲזַנֵּי כָּל־הָעָם אֶל־סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה: <sup>4</sup>וַיַּעֲמֵד עֹזְרָא הַסֹּפֵר עַל־מַגְדֵּל־עֵץ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לְדַבֵּר וַיַּעֲמֵד אֹצֵלוֹ .... <sup>5</sup>וַיִּפְתַּח עֹזְרָא הַסֹּפֵר לְעֵינֵי כָּל־הָעָם כִּי־מַעַל כָּל־הָעָם הָיָה וּכְפָתְחוּ עֵמָדוֹ כָּל־הָעָם: <sup>6</sup>וַיִּבְרַךְ עֹזְרָא אֶת־יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲנוּ כָּל־הָעָם אָמֵן אָמֵן בְּמַעַל דְּיָהֵם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לַיהוָה אַפַּיִם אֲרָצָה <sup>7</sup>.... וְהַלְוִיִּם מְבִינִים אֶת־הָעָם לַתּוֹרָה וְהָעָם עַל־עֵמָדָם: <sup>8</sup>וַיִּקְרָאוּ בַסֹּפֵר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים מִפָּרֶשׁ וּשְׁוֹם שֶׁקָּל וַיְבִינּוּ בַמִּקְרָא:

<sup>7:72</sup>When the seventh month arrived—the Israelites being [settled] in their towns—<sup>8:1</sup>the entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the LORD had charged Israel. <sup>2</sup>On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding. <sup>3</sup>He read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching. <sup>4</sup>Ezra the scribe stood upon a wooden tower made for the purpose, and beside him stood ... <sup>5</sup>Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; as he opened it, all the people stood up. <sup>6</sup>Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘‘Amen, Amen,’’ with hands upraised. Then they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the LORD with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup>... and the Levites explained the Teaching to the people, while the people stood in their places. <sup>8</sup>They read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading. (Neh 7:72–8:8, NJPS)

As we shall see in greater detail, among the many uncertainties in the English translation of this passage, especially its final verse, is the word here translated as ‘‘translating’’ (מְפָרֵשׁ), meaning some sort of activity that would enable the people to ‘‘understand the reading,’’ which could yield other possible translations as well, such as ‘‘distinctly.’’ As we shall also see, the author(s) of Ezra–Nehemiah, if he/they meant to denote translation per se, for example from Hebrew to Aramaic, could have used a verbal form of the loan-word root תרגם, as occurs in Ezra 4:7: מְתָרְגָּם (‘‘translated’’).

The scriptural passage narrates a one-time event in the career of the priest-scribe Ezra, sometime soon after the return from the Babylonian exile and the building of the (second) Jerusalem Temple and restoration of divine worship therein, ca. 450 BCE. As a sort of covenant-renewal ritual, Ezra is said to

<sup>1</sup> It is a great privilege and joy to include this modest contribution to a volume honoring Bob Wilson, one of my first and longest mentors and friends at Yale. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Kevin van Bladel, one of my newest colleagues.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, see Ezra 7:10, 12, 14, 21, 25–26; as well as below, n. 18.

have publicly read the “scroll of the Teaching (*tôrâ*) of Moses” to the multitude assembled just outside the eastern Temple gate on the occasion of the first day of the seventh month (Lev 23:23–25; Num 29:1–6), in anticipation of the fall pilgrimage festival of Sukkot.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the simple reading by Ezra was insufficient for conveying the full or correct meaning of the scriptural reading. It was critical that the people understood what they heard if they were to obey its words לָהֵם הִדְרִיעוּ לְהֵם (“for they understood the things that they were told” [Neh 8:12, NJPS]). Therefore, the reading needed to be accompanied by some sort of explanatory glosses, annotations, or translations (e.g., “translating it” in Neh 8:8, as rendered above, according to the NJPS, but “with interpretation,” according to the NRSV), the key Hebrew word being שִׁפְרָךְ, which can have a wide range of meanings, such as “clearly,” “distinctly” (as the LXX translates the word in Neh 8:8) or “with meaning.”

A translation, whether full or selective, would presumably have been from the original language of Hebrew to a vernacular dialect of Aramaic, a language presumed to have been better understood by the returnees from the Babylonian exile. They now lived under Persian imperial rule, whose local lingua franca was Aramaic, but whose official language was Persian. Behind this presumption is one that the people required a rendition of the “Teaching of Moses” that they could understand if they were to comply with and be held accountable to its commandments. As Jacob Myers surmises, but with caution, “Apparently Ezra read from the Hebrew while the Levites gave what he read in Aramaic and so assisted in making the law intelligible to the people, though the whole matter is far from clear.”<sup>4</sup> Another possibility is that the Levites circulated among the people, explaining difficulties in the Hebrew scriptural reading, without the text necessarily denoting a single continuous translation heard by all alike, as usually envisioned by way of retrojection from later practices. Note, however, that the passage makes no direct reference to the “Hebrew” language, or to “Judean” (*yahûdî*), as we find in Nehemiah 13:24,<sup>5</sup> or to Aramaic. Similarly, Philo, in describing the Sabbath synagogue services of the Essenes, says, εἶθ’ εἷς μὲν τις τὰς βίβλους ἀναγινώσκει λαβών, ἕτερος δὲ τῶν ἐμπειροτάτων ὅσα μὴ γνῶριμα παρελθὼν ἀναδιδάσκει (“Then one takes the books and reads aloud and another of especial proficiency comes forward and expounds what is not understood”), without suggesting necessarily a continuous translation or commentary, or any difference between the language of the reading and that of the explanations.<sup>6</sup>

The understanding of שִׁפְרָךְ (Neh 8:8) as denoting translation relies on the use of the same word, but slightly differently vocalized, in Ezra 4:18, in which Artaxerxes I, the Persian king, is speaking in response to a petition to cease construction of the Temple:

נִשְׁתַּנָּא דִּי שְׁלַחְתוֹן עֲלֵינָא מְפָרֶשׁ קָרִי קְדָמִי:

Now the letter that you wrote me has been read to me in translation. (NJPS)<sup>7</sup>

The original letter was written in Aramaic, but needed to be translated, by scribes or administrators, into Persian for the king to understand, and, as importantly, for it to be formally proclaimed and archived.<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, refers back to Ezra 4:7:

<sup>3</sup> I assume that the text read was an early form of what would become the Pentateuch, or selections therefrom. Compare the septennial Torah reading ceremony mandated by Deut 31:10–13 (הַקְהָל).

<sup>4</sup> Myers, *Ezra Nehemiah*, 154, adding, “cf. Kahle, *Cairo Geniza*, 124, who thinks the Targum goes back to Ezra.” For critical scholarship on Neh 8:1–8 and 8:8 in particular as denoting translation/targum, see, among others, Schaefer, *Esra der Schreiber*, 51–59; Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 113; van der Kooij, “Nehemiah 8:8”; Schiffman, “Early History”; LeFebvre, *Collections*, 40–47; Kottsieper, “‘And They Did Not Care to Speak Yehudit’”; Japhet, “Ritual of Reading”; Whitters, “Persianized Liturgy.”

<sup>5</sup> It also appears in 2 Kgs 18:26, 28; Isa 36:11, 13; 2 Chr 32:18. The earliest use of the word “Hebrew” to denote the language per se, is in the Prologue to Ben Sira (ca. 130 BCE).

<sup>6</sup> Philo, *Prob.* 82 (LCL 2:56–59).

<sup>7</sup> Similarly NRSV, “[T]he letter that you send to us has been read in translation before me.”

<sup>8</sup> For such professional translation and “language contact” by bilingual officials, see Wilson-Wright, “From Persepolis to Jerusalem,” 152–167.



על־אֶרְתַּחְשֶׁשֶׁת מְלִדָּה פָּרַס וּכְתַב הַנְּשִׁתָּנוּ כְּתוּב אֲרָמִית וּמְתָרְגָּם  
אֲרָמִית:

[They wrote] to King Artaxerxes of Persia, a letter written in Aramaic and translated.

Aramaic: (NJPS)<sup>9</sup>

It would appear, then, that the passive verbal forms מְפָרַשׁ (Ezra 4:18) and מְתָרְגָּם (Ezra 4:7) are synonyms meaning “translated” (here from Aramaic to Persian, or perhaps to Hebrew). Whether this meaning can be transferred to מְפָרַשׁ in Nehemiah 8:8 (for translation from Hebrew to Aramaic, presumably), with a slightly different vocalization, is reasonable, but not certain.

## 2.4 Ezra: Ezra as a Latter-Day Moses

Already in ancient rabbinic sources, amoraic but *not* tannaitic (though see below), Babylonian as well as Palestinian, Nehemiah 8:8 is understood to denote not just a one-time targumic translation of the Torah or parts thereof, in general, but the recitation and study of the specific, “authorized” Aramaic targum (“our targum”) of Onqelos.<sup>10</sup> In this way, anachronistic as it is (Onqelos is said to have lived around 100 CE), the authority of Targum Onqelos derives from its being anchored to the figure of Ezra as a second Moses, with a ritual enactment, as depicted in Nehemiah 8:1–8, mimicking and thereby experientially renewing the revelation at Mt. Sinai.<sup>11</sup> For those who simply identify the word מְפָרַשׁ as denoting translation/targum generically, it is the targumic tradition and activity in general that is so anchored, to be identified only later with a specific targumic text, whether written or oral. For the more generic sense, note the words of Saul Lieberman:

But the first rudiment of the interpretation of a text is the *ἐρμηνεία*, the literal and exact equivalent of the Hebrew תַּרְגוּם, which means both translation and interpretation. The Rabbis derived from the verse in Nehemiah (8:8) that Ezra performed the functions of a *ἐρμηνευτής* (translator and interpreter) and *γραμματικός*.<sup>12</sup>

It should not be surprising, therefore, that Ezra is portrayed as a second, latter-day Moses, already implicitly inner-biblically in Ezra–Nehemiah, but much more suggestively in the pseudepigraphic writing known as 4 Ezra, dating from the end of the first century CE, following the destruction of the Second Temple, presumably in Judea.<sup>13</sup> This idea finds even more concrete expression in early rabbinic traditions regarding Ezra, where the emphasis is on renewed language and script, which we shall treat

<sup>9</sup> NRSV: “the letter was written in Aramaic and translated.” This rendering presumes that the second “Aramaic” refers to the letter that follows as being in Aramaic, rather than Hebrew, as is the narrative frame. We find a similar usage of the word “Aramaic” in Dan 2:4. The ambiguity arises in part due to the absence of a preposition (e.g. “from” or “to”).

<sup>10</sup> For this equating of מְפָרַשׁ with “targum” (Onqelos), see b. Meg. 3a; b. Ned. 37b; y. Meg. 4:1, 74d; Gen. Rab. 36:8 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 1:342). The view of Targum Onqelos as being the “official” targum of the Pentateuch, as is Targum Jonathan of the Prophets, is more typically Babylonian. See, in particular, b. Meg. 3a, in which it is said that the targum revealed at the time of Ezra, according to Neh 8:8, was forgotten over the generations and had to be re-established by Onqelos in the first century CE. By this account, Onqelos is, in a sense, a latter-day Ezra. For the Torah having been forgotten by the people and restored by Ezra, see below, nn. 28–30. The same source in b. Meg. 3a attributes the targum of the Prophets to have been composed by/revealed through Jonathan ben Uzziel. Early Palestinian rabbinic sources seem to view targumic translation as not being bound to any particular targumic version, and to have been more spontaneous in their performance, both in study and in synagogue recitation. For the Babylonian view, see as well b. Qidd 49a; Fraade, “Rabbinic Views, 264–265 n. 30; and at greater length, Smelik, “Translation as Innovation.” Since Neh 8:1–8 is often viewed as a model (which it may have been) for what would eventually become the synagogue ritual for the public reading of the Torah in the synagogue, aspects of that later ritual are easily, but incorrectly, retrojected anachronistically onto the one-time ritual presided over by Ezra.

<sup>11</sup> For such reenactments, see, in particular, y. Meg. 4:1, 74d.

<sup>12</sup> Lieberman continues: “The elementary task of the interpreter of the Bible was to explain the *realia* and to render the rare and difficult term in a simpler Hebrew, or, sometimes, in Aramaic” (*Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 48).

<sup>13</sup> For a recent introduction, translation, and commentary to 4 Ezra, see Stone, *Fourth Ezra*.

following our consideration of 4 Ezra.<sup>14</sup>

First and foremost, Ezra is portrayed as a second receiver and transmitter of divine revelation, with some striking similarities to Moses. Just as Moses is addressed by God from a bush (Exod 3:1–6), so is Ezra, although it is not said to be burning (4 Ezra 14:1–2). Just as Moses is gone from the people for forty days and nights to receive revelation (Exod 24:18), so is Ezra (4 Ezra 14:36). Just as Moses receives both exoteric and esoteric revelation (4 Ezra 14:6), so does Ezra (4 Ezra 14:26; 14:45–46).

But there are also differences, albeit not as much emphasized. For example, Moses ascends a mountain to receive revelation (Exod 19), whereas Ezra goes to an uncultivated field (4 Ezra 14:37), although they both might be thought of as places of separation and solitude fitting for prophetic communication, Sinai being both a mountain and a wilderness. While Moses is said not to have eaten or drunk anything while on Mt. Sinai for forty days and nights, Ezra, according to 4 Ezra 9:24–25, subsisted in the field on a simple diet of flowers.<sup>15</sup> Whereas Moses himself records what is revealed to him (except perhaps for the last eight verses of Deuteronomy<sup>16</sup>), Ezra, according to 4 Ezra 14:24, is accompanied by five scribes who do the actual writing, in a previously unknown script (14:42).<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Rabbinic Sources: Ezra as a Latter-Day Moses

While some of these traditions or motifs find expression in early rabbinic sources, others are unique, so far as I can tell, to 4 Ezra (e.g., Ezra being addressed from a bush). To begin with, early rabbinic texts make the comparison between Moses and Ezra much more explicitly, directly, and exegetically, already in the Tosefta.<sup>18</sup>

ר' יוסי אומ' ראוי היה עזרא שתינתן תורה על ידו אילמלא קידמו משה נאמרה במשה עלייה ונאמרה בעזרא עלייה נאמרה במשה עלייה שנ' ומשה עלה אל האלהים נאמרה בעזרא עלייה הוא עזרא עלה מבבל מה עלייה האמורה במשה למד תורה לישראל שנ' ואתי צוה יי בעת ההיא ללמד אתכם חקים ומשפטים אף עלייה האמורה בעזרא למד תורה בישר' שנ' כי עזרא הכין את לבבו לדרוש בתורת יי ולעשות וללמד בישר' חוק ומשפט.

R. Yose says: Ezra was worthy for the Torah to have been given by him, had not Moses preceded him. It is said of Moses “going up,” and it is said of Ezra “going up.” It is said of Moses “going up,” as it is said, “And Moses ‘went up’ to God” (Exod 19:3). It is said of Ezra “going up,” as it is said, “That Ezra ‘came up’ from Babylonia” (Ezra 7:6). Just as, in the case of “going up” which is said of Moses, he taught Torah to Israel, as it is said, “At the same time the LORD commanded me to teach you laws and rules” (Deut 4:14), so, in the case of “going up” which is said of Ezra, he taught Torah to Israel, as it is said, “For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the LORD so as to observe it, and to teach to Israel laws and rules” (Ezra 7:10).<sup>19</sup>

Both Moses and Ezra ascended (Moses literally, Ezra figuratively), in order to teach Torah to Israel. The fact that Scripture uses much the same language to describe their ascending and teaching of Torah “laws and rules,” suggests that Scripture itself is equating their roles. Perhaps hyperbolically, Moses’s only advantage over Ezra is that he got there first, as it were.

<sup>14</sup> For a broader treatment of 4 Ezra (and 2 Baruch) in light of early rabbinic literature, see Fraade, “4 Ezra and 2 Baruch.”

<sup>15</sup> According to rabbinic sources, Moses was like the celestial angels in partaking of neither food nor beverage while on Mt. Sinai for forty days and nights. See Exod 34:28; Deut 9:9,18; b. Yoma 4b; Gen. Rab. 48:14 (ed. Theodor-Alback, 491); AbotR. Nat. 1 (ed. Schechter, 1). For fasting or a vegetarian diet in preparation for receiving revelation or entering a spiritual state, see 1 Kgs 19:8; Dan 10:2–3; 2 Bar. 9:2; 20:5–6; 4 Ezra 5:13,20; 6:31,35; Apoc. Ab. 9:7; Philo *Legat.* 3.138–145 (LCL 1:392–399); *Mos.* 2.14, 68–70 (LCL 6:482–485); Matt 4:2; Luke 4:2; Josephus *Vita* 11 (LCL 1.4–7).

<sup>16</sup> On which, see Sifre Deut. 357 (ed. Finkelstein, 427–428) and the sources cited in Finkelstein’s notes ad loc. On the larger question of the role of Moses as recorder of revelation, both at Sinai and thereafter, see Fraade, “Moses and the Commandments.”

<sup>17</sup> See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 6:443–44 n. 44; Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 410–411, 439; and below.

<sup>18</sup> T. Sanh. 4:7, following MS Erfurt.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. y. Meg. 1:9 (11), 71b–c; b. Sanh. 21b–22a. For expressions of Ezra’s pedagogic authority, similar to that of Ezra 7:10, see above, n. 2.

Similarly, the notice in 4 Ezra 14:42 that the five scribes who accompanied Ezra “wrote what was dictated, in characters that they did not know,” is usually associated with an early rabbinic tradition (in the continuation of the previously cited passage from the Tosefta) to which we now turn:<sup>20</sup>

אף הוא ניתן בידיו כתב ולשון שנ' וכתב הנשתווון כתוב ארמית ומתורגם ארמית מה תורגמו ארמית אף כתבו ארמית ואומ' ולא כהלין כתבא למיקרי ופישרה להחוואה למלכא מלמד שבאותו היום ניתן ואומ' וכתב לו את משנה התורה הזאת וג' תורה עתידה להשתנות ולמה נקרא שמה אשורי על שום שעלה עמהן מאשור ר' אומ' בכתב אשורי ניתנה תורה לישראל וכשהטאו נהפכה להן לרועץ וכשזכו בימי עזרה חזרה להן אשורית שנ' שובו לביצרון אסירי התקוה גם היום מגיד משנה אשיב לך.

Also through him [Ezra] were given a script and a language, as it is said, “a letter written in Aramaic [script] and translated [into Aramaic]” (Ezra 4:7<sup>21</sup>). Just as its translation [language] was Aramaic, so too its script was Aramaic. And it says, “But they could not read the writing, nor make known its meaning to the king” (Dan 5:8).<sup>22</sup> This teaches that on that very day it [viz., the changed Torah] was given. And it says, “And he shall write a copy [or, an altered version] of this law” (Deut 17:18): a Torah which is destined to be changed.<sup>23</sup> And why was it [the Aramaic script] called Assyrian? Because it came up with them from Assyria. Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] says, “The Torah was given to Israel [at Mt. Sinai] in Assyrian script, but when they sinned, it was changed to *Ro 'as* [Samaritan script]. But when they merited it in the time of Ezra, it reverted for them back to Assyrian, as it says, ‘Return to Bizzaron [Samaria], You prisoners of hope. In return [I] announce this day: I will repay you double’” (Zech 9:12).<sup>24</sup>

The Tosefta continues (4:8) with another possibility, attributed to Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar (ca. 200 CE), and based on Esther 8:9 (כְּכַתְּבָם וְכַלְשׁוֹנָם; “according to their writing and language”) that neither the language nor the script had changed from revelation to the present, language and script being, in a sense, mutually connected and inseparable. This, of course, directly contradicts the interpretation of Deuteronomy 17:18 (מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת) as referring to “a Torah which is destined to be changed,” whether in language, script, or both.<sup>25</sup>

The passage begins by crediting Ezra with having introduced both the “square” Aramaic (a.k.a. Assyrian) script and language (of targum), just as, it is presumed, Moses had previously introduced the Hebrew script and language at Mt. Sinai, script and language going, as it were, hand in hand. However, whereas the script of the Torah was permanently changed (from Paleo-Hebrew to Aramaic/Assyrian) by Ezra, its language—although perhaps briefly changed, as per Rabbi Judah the Patriarch—remained the same (Hebrew) as it had been. The continuation of the passage presents other rabbinic views that assert either that such a change of script did not take place, and that the Torah was always written in the Hebrew language and the Aramaic (Assyrian) script, or that if there had been a change in script, it had been only for a while, between Moses and Ezra, after which it was restored, not changed, by Ezra to its original combination. The net result is that the Torah of rabbinic times is presumed, in the end, to have been a partly altered or hybrid Hebrew text in Aramaic/Assyrian script, rather than a pure, unalloyed Hebrew language and script (e.g., Samaritan) or Aramaic language and script (e.g., Syriac Christian).

According to a later elaboration of this tradition,<sup>26</sup> it was the Israelites of Ezra’s time who chose, as a sort of diplomatic compromise, to retain the Hebrew language of the Torah (as revealed by Moses), but to change its scrip to Aramaic/Assyrian (as introduced by Ezra), a Moses-Ezra, Hebrew-Aramaic,

<sup>20</sup> T. Sanh. 4:7, following MS Erfurt.

<sup>21</sup> On which, see above, n. 9.

<sup>22</sup> That is, they could neither decipher its script nor comprehend its language, both being in Aramaic.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Sifre Deut 160 (ed. Finkelstein, 211); y. Meg. 1:9 (11), 71b–c; b. Sanh. 21b–22a. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 4:355–56; 6:443–44 nn. 41–44; Naeh, “Script of the Torah [A].”

<sup>24</sup> When they return from exile, they will also (doubly) return to the Torah as it had been originally revealed at Mt. Sinai in Assyrian (Aramaic) script. The Torah was changed from what had been revealed at Mt. Sinai, but only temporarily, since ultimately it remained the same.

<sup>25</sup> See above, n. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Y. Meg. 1:9 (11), 71b; y. Soṭah 7:2, 21c; b. Sanh. 21b.

language-script hybrid. Thus, the Hebrew language and the Hebrew script are not inextricably linked to one another.

This is most likely a retrojection from a later time when Hebrew and Aramaic vied with one another, as with Greek, for socio-linguistic priority and code-switching, especially with respect to scriptural reading (Hebrew), translation (Aramaic), and interpretation (mainly Hebrew) in Judea and Babylonia, but not in the western diaspora. The same trilingual competition, as it were, is reflected in the multi-lingual diversity of synagogue and funerary inscriptions, both in the Land of Israel and in the Jewish diaspora.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, the “newly” introduced Aramaic/Assyrian script continued to be used by Jews down to the present, not just for the Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic languages, but, for later Jewish hybrid or “bridge” languages across centuries and continents (Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, Yiddish, and many others). What begins as a simple reference to an unrecognized script in 4 Ezra develops into a complex discussion of the relation of language to script in revelation and its transmission, and of the ways in which Ezra was imagined not just as a belated Moses as teacher and transmitter of Torah, but as a scribal innovator of lasting consequence. This is not to presume that the early Rabbis knew of 4 Ezra or vice versa, but it does suggest that they are employing, each in their own way and for their own purposes, a shared tradition of indeterminable origin, or at the very least a common motif.

#### 4. Rabbinic Sources: Ezra as Repository of Collective Memory

Finally, I wish to add to the mix of traditions two that signal Ezra’s unique role in the renewal and transmission of Torah, without reference to language and script, but with respect to memory, raising the question of the centrality of memory—and the anxiety of forgetting—to the scribal vocation as preserver and transmitter of collective memory. These are tannaitic (first two centuries CE) and amoraic (next five centuries), Palestinian and Babylonian:<sup>28</sup>

מה אילו זה שעמד וקיים תורה בישראל לא היתה תורה משתכחת מה אילו לא עמד שפן בשעתו עזרא בשעתו רבי עקיבה בשעתו לא היתה תורה משתכחת.

Were it not for those who arose and established the Torah, would it not have been forgotten from among Israel? Had not Shaphan in his time, Ezra in his time, and R. Akiba in his time stood up, would it not have been forgotten?<sup>29</sup>

שבתחלה כשנשתכחה תורה מישראל עלה עזרא מבבל ויסדה, חזרה ונשתכחה עלה הלל הבבלי ויסדה, חזרה ונשתכחה עלו רבי חייא ובניו ויסדה.

For in ancient times when the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it. When it was again forgotten, Hillel the Babylonian came up and established it. When it was again forgotten, R. Hiyya and his sons came up and established it.<sup>30</sup>

In these passages, Ezra takes his place within a chronological chain of select learned figures who periodically reestablish the Torah by saving it from being forgotten, a chain that begins within the Bible and culminates with rabbinic sages, establishing, in a sense, a diachronic chain of memory that is repeatedly broken and heroically restored. It is worth noting that all three of the restorers are Babylonian immigrants to the land of Israel, highlighting an ongoing tension and competition between homeland and diaspora. Needless to say, the figure who implicitly precedes Ezra in all these chains of forgetfulness is the Egyptian Moses—another immigrant, of sorts—with whom revelation began before being repetitively forgotten. If any link in the chain had been “forgotten,” the chain would have ceased to exist.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, each of the Babylonian sages in the second paragraph, beginning with Hillel,

<sup>27</sup> For details, see Fraade, “Language Mix.”

<sup>28</sup> See Naeh, “Arts of Memory.” See also above, n. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Sifre Deut. 48 (ed. Finkelstein, 112; trans. Hammer, 104), as well as the continuation, on which see Fraade, “Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited.”

<sup>30</sup> B. Sukkah 20a. For other rabbinic texts that speak of a practice having been forgotten and restored/arranged (שכחום וחזר וסדרום), see: b. Shabb. 104a; b. Yoma 80a; b. Sukkah 44a; b. Meg. 3a (treated above, n. 9); 18a.

<sup>31</sup> See Fraade, “4 Ezra and 2 Baruch,” 366–368 (“Torah Destroyed/Hidden/Forgotten and Restored”). For the idea

brought with them, presumably, their diasporic (and hence multilingual) learning. It is as if to say that had they not migrated, geographically and linguistically, the Torah might not have survived and been “established,” perhaps a polemical point since the second tradition is found only in the Babylonian Talmud, whereas the preceding one is of Palestinian provenance. In the former, the rescuers stood up (עמד), whereas in the latter they ascended (עלה, that is, immigrated).

## 5. Conclusion

If previously Ezra is credited for his innovation of changing (or, according to some, restoring) the script (and, according to some, the language) of the Torah, from Hebrew to Aramaic (targum), here he is credited with restoring the continuity of memory (and presumably practice). As a scribe, Ezra switches as easily between scripts as he does between languages; as between past memory and present practice. Taking these texts together, Ezra stands as a model of the scribal vocation overall: mastery of script and tongue; repository of memory and law, each in a sense both generative and restorative, with each dyad being dynamically interdependent both within itself and with the others. Of course, the texts we have engaged—biblical, pseudepigraphic (4 Ezra), and rabbinic—are themselves innovative preservers and shapers of language and memory. Their full histories are beyond our ability, or collective memory, to trace reliably, even if they are imagined as having begun with Moses at Sinai as inscriber and teacher of texts and shaper of memories, of which his successors are worthy inheritors and innovators in their own successive times, places, and languages.<sup>32</sup>

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that the prophets simply restored what had been forgotten since Sinai, and hence are not sources of new revelation, see b. Meg. 3a, with many parallels in both Talmuds, on which see Smelik, “Translation as Innovation,” 35 n. 33. On the role of Moses in the construction of collective memory, see Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, esp. 1–22. On the rabbinic construction of memory and identity with respect to calamitous loss, see Fraade, “Memory and Loss.”

<sup>32</sup> On law as legacy, focusing on a midrashic text that stars Moses and Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, see Fraade, “‘Enjoin Them.’” On Moses as a polyglot in seventy languages, see Fraade, “Moses and Adam as Polyglots.”

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