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Ezra and Nehemiah

Our examination of Ezra-Nehemiah in this chapter will involve a review of the initial return of exiles under the authority of Persia, the career of Ezra, and the “memoir” of Nehemiah.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally counted as one book. In modern times, they have often been regarded as part of the Chronicler's History. The concluding verses of 2 Chronicles (36:22-23) are virtually identical with the opening verses of Ezra (Ezra 1:1-3a). There are numerous points of affinity between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah; both show great interest in the temple cult and matters related to it, such as liturgical music and the temple vessels. Some scholars argue that these similarities only reflect the common interests of Second Temple Judaism. It seems best to regard Ezra-Nehemiah as an independent composition.

The content of Ezra-Nehemiah may be outlined as follows.

- I. Ezra 1–6, the return of the exiles and the building of the temple. These events took place more than half a century before the time of Ezra and are reported on the basis of source documents. All of 4:8—6:18 is in Aramaic, but this section cannot be regarded as a single source. Rather it seems that the author cited an Aramaic document and then simply continued in Aramaic. This section is complicated by the fact that the author disrupts the historical sequence to group together related material. At the end of chapter 1 the leader of the Judean community in 539 B.C.E. is named Sheshbazzar. In chapter 3 the rebuilding of the temple is undertaken by the high priest Joshua and Zerubbabel, with no mention of Sheshbazzar. These events can be dated to the reign of King Darius (520 B.C.E.). Yet in 5:16 we are told that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the temple. In between we find correspondence addressed to King Artaxerxes (486–465) and Darius (522–486). Evidently, the principle governing the composition is thematic rather than chronological.

2. The Ezra memoir. The account of the mission of Ezra is found in Ezra 7–10 and continued in Nehemiah 8–9. This account contains both first- and third-person narratives. Sources incorporated in this account include the commission of King Artaxerxes to Ezra (Ezra 7:12–26), the list of those who returned with Ezra (8:1–14), and the list of those who had been involved in mixed marriages (10:8–43).
3. The Nehemiah memoir. The account of the career of Nehemiah is found in the first person account in Neh 1:1—7:73a. Nehemiah 11–13 also pertains to the career of Nehemiah. These chapters include material from various sources, including a first person memoir (e.g., 12:31–43 and 13:4–31).

It is apparent from this summary that Ezra–Nehemiah reports three sets of events: the initial return and rebuilding of the temple, the career of Ezra, and the career of Nehemiah. It is generally believed that these reports were compiled and edited sometime after the mission of Nehemiah, probably around 400 B.C.E.

THE INITIAL RETURN

The decree of Cyrus, with which Ezra begins, accords well with what we know of Persian policy toward conquered peoples. An inscription on a clay barrel, known as the Cyrus Cylinder (*ANET*, 315–16; see chapter 19, above), reflects the way the Persian king presented himself to the people of Babylon. Marduk, god of Babylon, he claimed, had grown angry with the Babylonian king Nabonidus for neglecting his cult, and had summoned Cyrus to set things right. According to the decree in Ezra 1, he told the Judeans that it was “YHWH the God of heaven” who had given him the kingdoms of the earth and had charged him to build the temple in Jerusalem. Some scholars believe that the Hebrew edict in Ezra 1 is the text of a proclamation by a herald; others suspect that it is the composition of the author of Ezra–Nehemiah, based on the Aramaic edict preserved in Ezra 6:3–5. The latter edict says nothing about Cyrus’s indebtedness to YHWH but simply orders that the temple be rebuilt, to certain specifications, and that the vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar be restored. The authenticity of the Aramaic edict is not in dispute.

A noteworthy feature of the initial restoration is the designation of Sheshbazzar as “Prince of Judah.” “Prince” (Hebrew *nāšî*) is the old title for the leader of the tribes in the Priestly strand of the Pentateuch, and is also the preferred title for the Davidic ruler in Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25). The use of this title strongly suggests that Sheshbazzar was descended from the line of David and so was a potential heir to the throne. Zerubbabel, who appears to have succeeded Sheshbazzar as governor of Judah, is listed in the Davidic genealogy in I Chron 3:19, but Ezra draws no attention to Zerubbabel’s Davidic ancestry. The editors of Ezra–Nehemiah were loyal Persian subjects, with no sympathy for messianic dreams.

Sheshbazzar disappears quickly and silently from the stage of history. According to Ezra 5:16, it was he who laid the foundation of the temple. Yet in Ezra 3 it is Joshua



Judah as a Province of the Persian Empire 445–333 B.C.E.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

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and Zerubbabel who take the lead in rebuilding the temple, and the book of Zechariah explicitly credits Zerubbabel with laying the foundation (Zech 4:9). Zerubbabel's activity was in the reign of Darius, nearly two decades after the return. The lapse of time is not noted in Ezra. Any delay in the rebuilding is explained by the opposition of "the adversaries of Judah" (4:1). These people offered to join in the building, "for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esarhaddon of Assyria who brought us here." The implication is that the people who were in the land when the exiles returned were the descendants of the settlers brought to northern Israel by the Assyrians (2 Kgs 17:24). The people of Samaria, who had their own governor, hoped to exercise influence over Jerusalem. But there must also have been some people who were native Judeans who had not been deported, and who wanted to be included in the community around the Second Temple. The leaders of the exiles, however, took a strictly exclusivist position: "You shall have no part with us" (Ezra 4:3). The exiles regarded themselves as a pure community, which should not be mingled with "the people of the land." This rejection of cooperation, even from fellow Yahwists, was a fateful decision, and set the stage for centuries of tensions between the Jewish community and its neighbors.

The correspondence cited to show the opposition to the returnees is out of chronological order. The letter in Ezra 4:11-22 is addressed to King Artaxerxes (probably Artaxerxes I, 465–424 B.C.E.),

The tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae, Iran.



and is concerned with the rebuilding of the city walls, not with the temple. The city walls are the great preoccupation of Nehemiah, who was active in Jerusalem in the reign of Artaxerxes. This document is inserted into the account of the building of the temple to explain the delay in the construction. According to Ezra 4:17-22, the king ordered that the work be stopped. In contrast, the second letter, in 5:6-17, is addressed to Darius and concerns the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra 6 records the response of Darius, authorizing the continuation of the building of the temple. The impression is given that the Persian authorities vacillated. If the letter to Artaxerxes is restored to its proper context, however, there is no indecision on the part of the Persians with regard to the temple. The rebuilding had been authorized, and the objections were overruled.

THE CAREER OF EZRA

In Ezra 7:1 the narrative jumps back to the reign of Artaxerxes. There were three Persian kings with this name: Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.E.), Artaxerxes II (405/404–359/358), and Artaxerxes III (359/358–338). Most scholars assume that the reference in Ezra is to Artaxerxes I. The mission of Nehemiah can be dated with confidence to the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I (445), and the biblical record places Ezra before Nehemiah. Nonetheless, there are problems with this dating, and a significant minority of scholars believes that Nehemiah came first, and that Ezra was commissioned by Artaxerxes II in 398. If Ezra came first, then Nehemiah came a mere thirteen years later. Yet he encountered many of the same problems that had occupied Ezra, notably the problem of intermarriage with the neighboring peoples. We should have to assume then that Ezra's reforms were short-lived and, moreover, that he had failed to restore the city walls. But it is likely that his reforms *were* short-lived. Nehemiah complains that his policies were flouted when he returned to the royal court for a time between his two terms as governor. Ezra's policies, which required widespread divorce, must have been resented by many people. Moreover, Ezra was a religious reformer, and so it is not surprising that he failed to concern himself with the city walls. The evidence is not conclusive, but the biblical order of Ezra and Nehemiah remains the more probable.

Ezra is introduced as “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6). He was also a priest, descended from Zadok and Aaron (7:1-6). He is sent to Jerusalem by the Persian king “to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand,” and also to convey an offering of silver and gold to the temple of YHWH. This mission makes good sense in light of general Persian policy. The Persian king Darius I was widely revered as a legislator in antiquity. The Persian kings had a strong interest in codifying the laws of the various subject peoples in their empire. People might live by their own laws, but it should be clear what those laws were. We know that Darius I appointed a commission of priests and scribes to collect the laws of Egypt. Many scholars have assumed that this was part of a program to codify the local laws within the empire, and that he would have demanded Judeans also to collect their laws. If this is correct, then the Torah was produced at the behest of the Persian rulers. But there is

no record of such collection of laws outside of Egypt. The Egyptian scribes produced two copies of their laws, one in Demotic (late Egyptian) and one in Aramaic. The Torah was only produced in Hebrew, and could not be read by the Persians without the aid of a translator. Nonetheless, there is good evidence that the Persians allowed their subjects to live by their traditional laws. According to Ezra 7, the initiative for Ezra's mission seems to have come from Ezra rather than from the king, but royal authorization would have been necessary in order for Ezra's law to be proclaimed in Jerusalem.

An example of Persian authorization of the regulation of the Jewish cult has survived in the form of the so-called Passover Papyrus, from 419 B.C.E., which is part of an archive of Aramaic papyri relating to a Jewish community at Elephantine in southern Egypt. This papyrus gives instructions for the observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, conveyed to the satrap, by authority of Darius II. It is unlikely that any Persian king had much interest in the details of Jewish law. The initiative surely came from Jewish leaders, but they required Persian authorization to enforce their regulations. The mission of Ezra must be seen in the context of this Persian policy of co-opting loyal subjects, and allowing them to regulate their local cults.

The Law of Ezra

In Jewish tradition Ezra is revered as the person who restored the law of Moses, and it is generally assumed that his law was the Torah as we have it. Some modern scholars also credit Ezra with the final edition of the Pentateuch, incorporating the Priestly strand. There are numerous echoes of Deuteronomic law in Ezra and Nehemiah. These are especially prominent in connection with the issue of intermarriage. It is also clear that Ezra knew some form of the Priestly legislation. This appears especially in the regulations for the festivals of Tabernacles (Sukkoth) and Passover. But there are also some details that do not conform either to Deuteronomic or to Priestly law. The most important example concerns the festivals of the seventh month (Tishri) in Nehemiah 8–9. On the first day of the month, Ezra conducts a solemn reading and explanation of the Torah. This is the date set for Rosh Hashanah, the New Year's Festival, in Lev 23:24. Leviticus speaks of a holy convocation, accompanied by trumpet blasts, but does not mention a reading of the law. There are no trumpet blasts in Nehemiah. In Neh 8:13–17 we are told that on the second day of the month the people discovered the commandment about the Festival of Tabernacles, which they proceeded to observe by making booths and living in them. In Lev 23:34 this festival is supposed to be observed on the fifteenth of the month. Most notable is the discrepancy concerning Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is legislated for the tenth of the month in Lev 23:27. There is no mention of Yom Kippur in Nehemiah, and there is no observance on the tenth of the month. There is, however, a day of fasting and repentance on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month in Neh 9:1. The simplest explanation of these discrepancies is that the cultic calendar had not yet taken its final shape when the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were edited. Nonetheless it remains true that the law of Ezra corresponds substantially to the Torah as we know it, including both Deuteronomy and some form of the Priestly code.

According to the account in Ezra-Nehemiah, the people of Jerusalem had no knowledge of the book of the law before Ezra's arrival. In fact, the prophetic oracles of Haggai, Zechariah, and Third Isaiah, which date to the period before Ezra, never appeal to such a book. Yet at some point, the book of the Torah was recognized as the law of Judah. Ezra is the person credited with this momentous innovation in the biblical tradition.

The Problem of Intermarriage

The dominant issue in Ezra, however, is intermarriage. In 9:1-2, Ezra discovers that "the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way." The "peoples of the lands" are identified in traditional biblical terms (cf. the lists in Gen 15:19-21; Exod 3:8, 17; Deut 7:1; etc.). Some of the names on this list were of immediate relevance (Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites), while others were obsolete (Jebusites, Hittites). We must assume, however, that the primary temptation to intermarriage came from the descendants of the Judeans who had never gone into exile and from the Samaritans. These people were not regarded as members of the Jewish community, at least by purists such as Ezra. The attraction of intermarriage, apart from the normal development of human relations, was compounded by the economic situation. The returning exiles presumably hoped to recover their ancestral property in Judah. Those who had occupied the land in the meantime presumably did not want to cede possession of it now (cf. Ezek 11:15). One way in which the returnees might recover rights of inheritance in Judah was by intermarriage.

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with the abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way." When I heard this, I tore my garments and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice.

(Ezra 9:1-4)

It is noteworthy that Ezra is only concerned about Jewish men who take foreign wives (note, however, that Nehemiah also objects to intermarriage with foreign men, Neh 13:25). Jewish women who married outside the community did not endanger the patrimony, since they inherited only if there were no male heirs (Numbers 27). Such women were no longer part of the Jewish community. Jewish men who married foreign women, however, brought them into the community and so "mixed the holy seed." An alternative explanation is also possible. In later Judaism a child was recognized as Jewish if its mother was Jewish (this

is called the “matrilineal principle”). The children of Jewish women would still be Jewish, even if the fathers were not, whereas the children of foreign women would not be so.

The prohibition of intermarriage is based on two passages in Deuteronomy, 7:1-3 and 23:3-8. In each case, specific peoples are listed. It is apparent that Ezra’s prohibition of intermarriage is broader than either of these, because it includes the Egyptians. The point, then, is not just strict observance of the law, but bespeaks a more extreme fear of contact with outsiders. Moreover, Ezra provides a new rationale for the prohibition. The danger is not just that those who worship other gods might lead the Israelites into idolatry, but that the “holy seed” would be defiled by the union itself. This is quite a novel idea in the Hebrew Bible and presupposes a greater gulf between Jew and Gentile than anything we have seen hitherto.

The solution, allegedly proposed by one Shecaniah, was drastic: “Let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children” (Ezra 10:3). This action was not taken without coercion. Members of “the congregation of the exiles” were ordered to appear in Jerusalem within three days or have their property forfeited. Then they were made to assemble in the open square before the temple in inclement weather, until they “trembled” not only because of the matter at hand but also because of the heavy rain. Finally, the people agreed to separate from their foreign wives, but pleaded that they not have to stand in the rain. A commission was established to oversee the matter, and within two months all foreign wives had been divorced. Ezra 10 provides a long list of the transgressors. The chapter ends on a chilling note: “All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children” (10:44). We are not told where they went; presumably they returned to their fathers’ houses.

Ezra and Nehemiah

We do not know how long Ezra remained in Jerusalem. He and Nehemiah are mentioned together in Neh 8:9; 12:26; and 12:36. It is clear that the editor of Ezra-Nehemiah wanted to give the impression that they were contemporaries. Yet Nehemiah plays no part in Ezra’s reform, and Ezra plays no part in Nehemiah’s attempt to fortify Jerusalem. Most scholars conclude that the two men were not active in Jerusalem at the same time.

THE NEHEMIAH MEMOIR

The core of the book of Nehemiah is provided by a first person account, known as the “Nehemiah memoir,” which gives a forceful account of Nehemiah’s career from his own point of view. This account is largely an attempt to justify himself and his actions. He appeals frequently to God to “remember for my good . . . all that I have done for this people” (Neh 5:19; cf. 13:14, 22, 31). It has been suggested that Nehemiah was required to write a report for the Persian court in response to the complaints of his enemies. Nehemiah’s defense, however, is addressed to God rather than to the king, and so we must assume that such a report, if it existed, was adapted by Nehemiah so as to present his case in the context of the Jewish community.

Nehemiah's account begins in "the twentieth year" of Artaxerxes. Since some of the figures who appear in the account are also known from the Elephantine papyri, there is no doubt that the reference is to Artaxerxes I, and the date is 445 B.C.E. At the outset of the narrative, Nehemiah is a cupbearer to the king. This was a position of considerable importance. The cupbearer had immediate access to the king and was in a position to give him informal advice.

The mission of Nehemiah is undertaken at his own request. His purpose is specifically to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He is granted the commission, and also a military escort, because of his personal standing with the king. At first, it seems that a brief mission was envisioned. In Neh 5:14, however, we learn that he was appointed governor of Judah and that he occupied the position for twelve years. Then he returned to the court, but shortly he returned for a second stint (13:6-7).

Nehemiah's great preoccupation on his first visit to Jerusalem was the rebuilding of the city walls. Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, a prominent Ammonite, and their friends express concern that Nehemiah was rebelling against the king (2:19). Later they claimed that Nehemiah wanted to make himself king (6:6-7). They are not said to complain to the Persian court. They appear to have accepted Nehemiah's royal authorization. These people were clearly involved in a power struggle with Nehemiah. His actions can be understood as an attempt to make Jerusalem independent of Samaria and Ammon. He was not attempting to achieve independence from Persia. On the contrary, the distant Persian monarch was the source of his authority.

In addition to political problems Nehemiah also had to deal with a severe economic crisis caused by a famine. According to Nehemiah 5, there was a great outcry, because people had to pledge their fields and houses to get grain. Some were forced to sell sons and daughters as slaves, and some daughters were ravished. The root of the problem (apart from drought) was "the king's tax" (5:4). We do not have much specific information about Persian taxation in Judah, but it was evidently oppressive.

Nehemiah was not about to challenge the king's tax, since his own authority

Shallow drinking vessel, known as a phiale, inscribed in Old Persian cuneiform with phrase about King Artaxerxes I; Achaemenid period, 5th century B.C.E. Now in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, DC, USA.



derived from the king. He did, however, challenge the practices of Jews who took pledges from their brethren. The Book of the Covenant (Exod 22:25-27) forbade taking interest from the poor or holding their belongings (cf. Deut 24:10-13). Nonetheless, debt was an endemic problem in ancient Israel and Judah, in both the monarchic and the postexilic periods, sometimes leading to the loss of ancestral property and sometimes to slavery (cf. Amos 8:6; Isa 5:8).

Nehemiah's proposal amounts to a remission of debt and restoration of property, such as was envisioned in the Jubilee Year in Leviticus 25. Such remissions were granted periodically in the ancient Near East, often at the beginning of the reign of a new king. Such reforms tended to be short-lived. We do not know how long Nehemiah's reforms remained in effect. It is unlikely that they outlived his governorship.

The problem of intermarriage appears again in the second term of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13). This passage serves as an introduction to a confrontation between Nehemiah and "the priest Eliashib" who had given a room in the temple to Tobiah the Ammonite, to whom he was related. The episode illustrates the violent character of Nehemiah: "I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the room" (Neh 13:8). It also shows the difficulty of instituting any lasting reform. Tobiah had been ensconced in the temple when Nehemiah was recalled to the Persian court. We learn in 13:28 that one of the grandsons of Eliashib was the son-in-law of Sanballat of Samaria. The purist policies of Ezra and Nehemiah could not erase the ties that bound the high priesthood in Jerusalem to the upper classes of the neighboring peoples.

In his second term Nehemiah devoted more of his attention to religious problems. In 13:15-22 we read of his attempts to enforce the observance of the Sabbath. The book ends with yet another problem involving intermarriage. "In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah. . . . And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair" (13:23-27). We can appreciate Nehemiah's concern for the erosion of Jewish identity. His tactics in beating people who did not conform, however, are uncomfortably reminiscent of the behavior of the Taliban when they were in control of Afghanistan.

Nehemiah emerges from his memoir as a person of great integrity. We only have his own account, and it has a clear apologetic character. If Eliashib had left a memoir, he would presumably have shown things in a different light. Nonetheless, we cannot doubt Nehemiah's sincerity. He insists that he sought no personal gain, and did not even avail of the allowance traditionally given to the governor (Neh 5:14-19). His legacy was less controversial than that of Ezra. In the words of Ben Sira: "The memory of Nehemiah also is lasting; he raised our fallen walls" (Sir 49:13).

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