

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE BOOKS OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a literature review on selected matters that have formed part of the major concerns of scholarly investigation in Ezra and Nehemiah from the last twenty years.²⁴ The subject matters include date and authorship, the relationship between 1 and 2 Chronicles to Ezra and Nehemiah, the composition and chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah, Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, the book of the Law, the ownership of the land of Judah, the political status of the state of Judah and the theology of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as the tension between the returned exiles and the rest of the people. The conception of 'Yahweh's people' seems to lay behind this tension in Ezra and Nehemiah.

2.2 DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

In what follows, the various scholarly conjectures concerning the date and authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah have been discussed. However, it should be noted that our reflection on date and authorship is related to the composition and chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah which has been discussed in the fourth section (2. 4) in this chapter. There, I have argued that

²⁴ For example, see Clines (1984, 1990); Williamson (1985); McConville (1985); Bracy (1988); Blenkinsopp (1989); Throntveit (1992); Breneman (1993); Eskenazi (1993, 1994); Japhet (1994); Smith-Christopher (1994); Bowman (1995); Richards (1995); Van Wyk (1996); Brown (1998), Grabbe (1998a & b), Klein (1999) and Farisani (2004) et cetera.

one sentence may not accurately describe the process which these works went through to arrive at the final stage. In other words, there were a number of independent sources which were used for the composition of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Consequently, it is difficult to explain the exact thing that happened in the process of compiling the various sources to form a single unit or narrative. In view of this complexity, scholars²⁵ have also found it difficult to identify the precise date(s) or author(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. So, the following discussion is a conjecture on some of the probable or possible date(s) for the final editing of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as its probable author(s).

According to Clines (1984:12-14) the issue of dating Ezra and Nehemiah cannot be divorced from the issue of the relationship between these two books and 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as matters concerning authorship and sources of Ezra and Nehemiah. Clines stressed that the above mentioned tie is necessary due to several reasons.

First, the author(s) of 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as of Ezra and Nehemiah is thought by several other scholars²⁶ to have been Ezra the priest, his associate, his student or an unknown Chronicler. In this sense, whoever the

²⁵Cf Clines (1984:12-14); Williamson (1987:45-46); Dillard and Longman III (1994:181-182) and Klein (1999: 664-665) et cetera.

²⁶ For example Albright (1921:119-120), Bright (1960:81; 1981:398), Myers (1965:xlvi), Archer, Jr. (1964:396) and Grabbe (1998b:11) view these works as originating from one person or a group of persons. See also Breneman (1993:32-35), for the detail references and list of some of the scholars who had advocated for this unity though Breneman himself supports a separate authorship.

person might have been, he/she was responsible for the final editorial work on the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles together with Ezra and Nehemiah.

Second, Ezra and Nehemiah share certain theological, literary and historical features with 1 and 2 Chronicles. For example, both works are considered to have been written in the post-exilic period and both have included stories which are assumed to have happened in the post-exilic period. Given this tie, it has been claimed that there is more logic to discussing the issue of dating Ezra and Nehemiah together with matters concerning authorship and composition. However, this section will limit itself to the probable suggestions on date and authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah which occurred about 400 BC. The issues of composition, chronology and other related subjects will be discussed in other subsequent subsections.

Considering the internal textual evidences from Ezra and Nehemiah, some scholars²⁷ have conjectured that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah can be dated between 450 BC and 350 BC²⁸. This is based on the assumption that there is no strong indication in the text of Ezra and Nehemiah which may suggest an earlier or a later date to the above suggestion. According to this perspective, all the events that have been reported in Ezra and Nehemiah are assumed to have happened between 539 BC and 400 BC. This proposal also

²⁷ Cf Clines (1984:14); Williamson (1987:45-46); Breneman (1993:41) and Klein (1999:664-665).

²⁸ Though this viewpoint is also contested by others (cf Williamson 1985: xxxvi and Throntveit 1992:10-11) and recently by Farisani (2004:226-228) who argues for the final date as late as 300 BC).

is based on the assumption that Ezra or his associate(s) may have been the final author(s) or editor(s).

This study therefore agrees with others²⁹ that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah might have been written about 400 BC for the following reasons:

- As Clines (1984:14) had noted, if Ezra returned to Judah in about 458, 437 or 427 BC, there is little reason to doubt that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were completed by 400 BC.
- Breneman (1993:41) who supported this viewpoint reasoned that there is no specific event in Ezra or Nehemiah that might have pointed to a later period.
- Klein (1999:664-665) also contended that since the location of the author is agreed by scholars to have been in Palestine; and coupled with the assumption that Ezra and Nehemiah probably migrated to Judah in 458 and 445 BC respectively, the compositional activities of these books therefore, must have happened within this period.
- If so, the likely date could be about 400 BC. Consequently, this research will also assume that the final editorial work on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah may have transpired under the auspices of the Chronicler, Ezra, Nehemiah or their associates in about 400 BC in Palestine.

²⁹ Clines (1984:14); Williamson (1987:45-46); Breneman (1993:41) and Klein (1999:664-665).

2.3 UNITY WITH 1 AND 2 CHRONICLES

A second subject of scholarly investigation is the unity of 1 and 2 Chronicles to Ezra and Nehemiah. Many scholars³⁰ previously advocated that 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as Ezra and Nehemiah are the works of a single author or editor. Those who advocated for this theory pointed to the overlap in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-3 as well as linguistic and theological similarities between the two books to substantiate their claims. Another reason for the assumed unity appeared to be the evidence from 1 Esdras, which recorded 2 Chronicles 35 to 36 and went through Ezra without indicating any break between the two narratives. Similarly, according to Breneman (1993:32), “the Jewish tradition found in the Talmud (Baba Bathra 15a),” supports the notion that 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah are the works of Ezra.³¹

However, in the last twenty years, many biblical scholars³² seem to have come to a consensus that 1 and 2 Chronicles are the work of another author independent of Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars who share this view proposed several reasons to support their contention. One such scholar is Throntveit (1992:9), who argues particularly against the supposed theological similarity.

³⁰ For example Albright (1921:119-120), Bright (1960:81; 1981:398), Myers (1965:xlvi), Archer, Jr. (1964:396) and Grabbe (1998b:11). See also Farisani (2004:209-210); Breneman (1993:32-35), Clines (1984:2), Dillard & Longman III (1994:181) and Throntveit (1992:9) for a detail discussion and a list of some of the scholars who had advocated for this unity.

³¹ Cf Hayes (1979:243-247) who also provides a good summary of this arguments from both sides in a manner one can easily grasp these issues.

³² Like Japhet (1968:371); Williamson (1985:xxi – xxiii); Breneman (1993:32-35); Dillard & Longman III (1994:180-181); Selman (1994); Richards (1995: 211-224) and Klein (1999:664).

He stated four major theological differences. He explained that the emphasis of the Chronicler on David and his covenant (cf 1 Chr 3:1-9; 6:31-80; 11:1-29:30) is completely absent in Ezra and Nehemiah. Similarly, the chronicler seemed to have ignored the Exodus traditions which are very pervasive in Ezra and Nehemiah (cf Ezr 9:1-15; Neh 1:5-11; 8:1-13:31). In addition, the tolerant attitude to foreign marriages in 1 and 2 Chronicles is completely alien to Ezra and Nehemiah. Finally, the frequent use of the concept of retribution in Chronicles appears to be absent from Ezra and Nehemiah. Ensuing from the above stated reasons, it appears difficult to dismiss Throntveit's arguments because a close reading of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as 1 and 2 Chronicles appears to reveal that his arguments are true.

Similarly, Klein (1999:664) argued that Ezra and Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles differ in their treatment of the Samaritans. According to him, the Chronicler is tolerant in the treatment of the Samaritans as opposed to the abhorrent attitude found in Ezra and Nehemiah toward the same group of people. Klein also noted that the Chronicler made frequent references to the prophets while Ezra and Nehemiah seemed to lay less emphasis on the role of the prophets. Moreover, the use of *~ynIyṭiN>h;* (the temple servants) and the 'sons of Solomon' are very pervasive in Ezra and Nehemiah (e.g. Ezr 2:40, 70; 8:20; Neh 7:73; 11:3-22), while with the exception of 1 Chronicles 9:2, the terms are almost completely absent in 1 and 2 Chronicles. Another difference he reiterated was that according to Ezra and Nehemiah, the term 'Israel' refers to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin

while in Chronicles, 'Israel' comprises of the twelve tribes. Apparently, those who had returned from the Babylonian exile appeared to have been mostly from the Southern part of Israel. Nothing is specifically said about those who were exiled to Assyria in about 722 BC from the Northern tribes of Israel. Yet, according to Ezra and Nehemiah, those who returned from the Babylonian exile to Judah appeared to have referred to themselves as representatives of the pre-exilic Israelite community.

Previously, Japhet (1968:331-371; cf Farisani 2004:211-212) had rejected the notion of common authorship. She explained that linguistic and theological similarities should be expected in both 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah narratives because these works seemed to have fallen within the same period of time, the first century after the exile (i.e. between 539 to 400 BC). She therefore reiterated that there is no convincing reason which suggests that both works were written or edited by a single person or group of people. Similarly, the issue of linguistic similarities is disputed by Dillard and Longman III (1994:171-172), due to the fact that there are more linguistic dissimilarities than the linguistic commonalities when both works are compared to each other.

In view of the above mentioned reasons, I will argue in support of the view that Ezra and Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles have separate authors or editors for the following reasons:

First, it should be borne in mind that the overlap at the end of 2 Chronicles and at the beginning of Ezra could be explained in another way. For example, one of the authors may have read the work of the other and may have incorporated it in his/her work in order to serve his/her theological or historical purpose(s) (cf Kraemer 1993:91; Dillard & Longman III 1994:171).

Second, it can also be argued that the appearance of the decree of Cyrus at the end of 2 Chronicles could have been borrowed from the beginning of the book of Ezra for the purposes of providing an optimistic ending to the canon when Chronicles was the final work in the Hebrew Bible during the Talmudic period (cf Hayes 1979:244).

Third, the extensive use of the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah by the author or editor of 1 Esdras does not necessarily mean that the various works were previously one work. As attested by Dillard and Longman III (1994:171), many scholars view 1 Esdras as a secondary development rather than having any unity with Ezra and Nehemiah (cf Farisani 2004:213-214).

Fourth, 1 and 2 Chronicles exhibit a tolerant attitude toward the northern Israelites as well as foreigners while the books of Ezra and Nehemiah portray an unkind attitude toward similar groups of people. Thus, I concur with the assertion that 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah have separate authorship (cf Farisani 2004:215).

2. 4 COMPOSITION, CHRONOLOGY AND UNITY

Another matter that seems to be very difficult for scholars to resolve is the composition and chronological sequence of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf Japhet 1994:189-216; Richards 1995:211-224). This subject inevitably leads to the argument concerning the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah. The *crux* of the matter is that in order to discuss the sources that were used for the composition of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, one also needs to deal with the question of how and when those sources were brought together to form a coherent narrative as we have it. This process will therefore require that one would need to find whether there is unity in the Ezra and Nehemiah narratives.

In view of the above connections, one of the basic questions which could be asked about the relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah is: should Ezra and Nehemiah be regarded as one work or as two separate works? Some scholars³³ argue persuasively for the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah. Their viewpoint is that Ezra and Nehemiah were originally or traditionally regarded as one work. The Talmud also proclaimed its unity (cf Williamson 1985:xxi; Breneman 1993:37). In addition, this unity is also assumed by the Masoretes (cf Williamson 1985:xxi; Breneman 1993:37). The Masoretes considered the two works as one by tallying the number of the verses of Ezra and Nehemiah as one book and by identifying Nehemiah 3:32 as the centre of the book (cf Korpel and Oesch 2002:121). Similarly, the author of Ecclesiastes may have

³³ Childs (1979: 635); Eskenazi (1988), Breneman (1993: 37) and recently, Farisani (2004:215-223) and Dillard & Longman III (1994:180-181) et cetera have argued for the unity of the two books.

assumed this unity according to Williamson (1985:xxi) and Breneman (1993:37). Some early manuscripts of the Septuagint (LXX) as well as the Christian Canon of Melito of Sardis in the second century assumed the same unity (cf Williamson 1985:xxi; Breneman 1993:37). Afterwards, Ezra and Nehemiah were separated into two books during the Middle Ages. Origen was the first theologian to have made this separation. Jerome also acknowledged this separation in his Latin Vulgate (cf Dillard & Longman III 1994:180-181).

From a similar perception, Grabbe (1998b:94-96) identified several textual similarities that point to Ezra and Nehemiah as a single work. First, the identical list of returnees in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 according to Grabbe points to the unity of the two books. He pointed that this similarity was not a haphazard or accidental occurrence. It was one of the literary techniques purposely designed to tie the two works together.

Second, the mention of the figure Ezra in Nehemiah 8 is invoked as another pointer to the unity of the two works. In elaborating on this unity, Grabbe (1998b:94) mentioned that the chronological sequence of the two works suggests that Ezra returned to Jerusalem prior to Nehemiah. But the occurrence of Ezra in the middle of the work of Nehemiah points to the unity of the two books.

Third, Grabbe (1998b:94-95) also indicated that the abrupt ending of the book of Ezra presupposed a continuation of the narrative in Nehemiah which will make the two portions of the narrative, a complete one. In view of this, Nehemiah picks up where Ezra had left off and completes the remainder of the story.

Fourth, Grabbe (1998b:95) also pointed to the common themes in both works such as the return of the people from exile: In each case,

- The Persian king is the person who does the sending through an official state decree.
- There was a threat to the community through intermarriage with the people of the land.
- There is a parallel structure between the two works.

It might seem very difficult to dismiss the above arguments that support the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah, but some biblical exegetes³⁴ have disagreed with it. These have argued in favour of a separate individual existence of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. One among those who has contested vehemently against the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah is Kramer (1993:74-75). He rejected the notion that the ancient believing community considered these works as a single book. According to him, it is one thing for the ancient community to have accepted the canonical arrangement of these works as a

³⁴ Young (1964:378, 386); Harrison (1969:1150); Vanderkam (1992:55-75); Kraemer (1993:73-92); Japhet (1994:189- 216) and Klein (1999: 664).

unity; it is quite another thing to consider the literary condition of these two works when they were composed.

In addition, he identified a fallacy in Eskenazi's view on the unity of these books. Kraemer (1993:75) stated that Eskenazi has made a quick jump from Ezra to Nehemiah when he claimed that both works were centred on the expansion of the house of God. Kraemer (1993:75) dismissed that claim by emphasizing that the book of Ezra is about the rebuilding of the house of God. In Nehemiah, this notion of rebuilding the house of God is peripheral. Rather, Nehemiah is centred on the rebuilding of Jerusalem, particularly the rebuilding of its city walls.

Kraemer (1993:75-76) made other important observations in order to support his assertion that Ezra and Nehemiah have separate authorship. His observations are among those which I have singled out for a detail discussion as could be seen from what follows:

Firstly, Kraemer observed that the beginning of the book of Nehemiah clearly marks what follows as an independent composition. Kraemer's assertion can better be observed by putting the last verse in the book of Ezra with the first verse in Nehemiah, side by side, as shown below:

"All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children" (Ezr 10:44).

"The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,..." (Neh 1:1).³⁵

³⁵ The quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995).

There is no evidence from the above two verses to suppose that there is a connection between the preceding passage in Ezra and the following one in Nehemiah. Ezra 10:44 is about the problem of intermarriage and the solution that had been provided by Ezra to the problem. The passage sounds as a good ending to the narrative. An intermarriage problem is identified. Then, a divorce solution is proposed and enforced.

Nehemiah 1:1 begins with a superscription introducing the words of Nehemiah, as well as Nehemiah the figure who resides in a distant land away from Jerusalem. He obviously had no connection to the events of intermarriage in Jerusalem. There is no mention of the problem of intermarriage in the first chapter of Nehemiah. This evidently suggests that the passage in Nehemiah 1:1 has set out to provide its own distinctive narrative account as opposed to the continuation of the narrative of the book of Ezra as supposed by those who argue in favour of the unity of the two works (cf Hayes 1979:245). The book of Nehemiah provides its own distinctive solution to the problem that has been raised from the first chapter of the book. It has little or nothing to do with the events that have happened in the last chapter of the book of Ezra.

Secondly, Kraemer (1993:75) observed that the repetition of the list of returnees from Ezra 2 in Nehemiah 7 sustained the argument that these two books were formerly independent works. If this was not the case, what was the purpose for such a repetition, Kraemer questions?

Thirdly, he (Kraemer 1993:76) pointed that the occurrence of the work of Ezra in Nehemiah 8 underscores the argument that these works were composed separately. If it were the same author, the story would have probably been situated in the book of Ezra where Ezra was carrying out his religious and marital reforms.

Fourthly, there are differences in literary styles between Ezra and Nehemiah. One difference is that Ezra is written in Hebrew and Aramaic while Nehemiah is completely written in the Hebrew language (Kraemer 1993:76). It has not been punctuated with any other language(s) apart from the Hebrew language.

Fifthly and lastly, there are distinctive ideologies between these two works. These suggest the independent nature of the material in question. According to Kraemer (1993:77), “the book of Ezra is a priestly book; its concerns are the temple, the priesthood and Levites, and purity-that is, the cult.” In contrast, the book of Nehemiah is a lay work. In some cases it is ambivalent about the priestly concerns. In other cases (Kraemer 1993:77) the book of Nehemiah supports the scribal values.

I have supported Kraemer concerning his argument in favour of the separation of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, I have disagreed with his last reason which he has indicated that Ezra is a priestly book while Nehemiah is a lay work. My observation is that the content of both works does not reveal Kraemer’s argument to be true. For example, the book of

Nehemiah also reveals that priestly concerns were part of the focus of its author or editor just as the book of Ezra shows.³⁶

In order to support the separateness of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Japhet (1994:196-197) has dismissed sharply the issue of the literary connection between the two works. She argued that between Ezra 1-6 and Ezra 7-10, one may easily find a literary and stylistic unity, whereas in Nehemiah 1-13 there is no such unity. This could best be explained by recognizing the distinctive nature of these two works (cf also Klein 1999:664).

Arguments concerning the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah can further be understood in the context of issues like the composition and chronology (Japhet 1994:200-201). Japhet recognized the issues of chronology and composition as some of the tantalizing phenomena facing the student of Ezra and Nehemiah. She reiterated that one of the major tasks of someone who is working on Ezra and Nehemiah is to determine the correct order of historical events in these books and to understand the author or editor's perception of history and chronology.

In an attempt to reconstruct the chronological events of Ezra-Nehemiah, Hoppe (1986:281-286) uses the Septuagint (LXX), the Qumran Scrolls, the Masoretic text and Cross³⁷ work on the Persian period to reconstruct the events in Ezra and Nehemiah during the Persian period. But despite the

³⁶ Cf Neh 3:1,17, 20, 22, 28; 7:1, 39, 63-65; 8:2, 9, 13; 10:28, 32-39; 11:3, 10-12, 20-22; 12:1-47; 13:1-13, 22, 28-31.

enormous promise entailed in his work, Hoppe's reconstruction is not left unquestioned. Mor (1977:57-67) is one among those who disagree with Cross' addition of two names of priests apart from those listed in Ezra and Nehemiah.

I concur with Japhet (1994:201) whose perception of the chronology of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah seems to provide a better picture of what has taken place in these works. In view of this, the following discussion will take an in-depth look at her observations.

Japhet (1994: 201) explained that Ezra and Nehemiah describe a series of events and occasionally provide readers with various chronological facts (e.g. Ezr 1:1; 3:8; 4:24; 5:13 etc.), but such facts do not seem to be in line with an overall chronological sequence of the history of these events. Given this complexity, Japhet wondered whether it will be better if anyone wishing to sort out the chronological sequence of events in Ezra and Nehemiah "must do it on the basis of unsystematic comments scattered through the book, comparing them with extra-biblical information derived from various sources, primarily the kings of Persia." However, Japhet quickly dismissed this method because it could lead any scholar to conclude that the author(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah is "a historian devoid of any sense[s] of structure or any consciousness of time, that is, not a historian at all" (Japhet 1994:207).

³⁷ Cross (1966:201-211).

On the contrary, Japhet (1994:208) suggested that the best method to sort out issues of chronology and history is to examine the author's view of history and chronology on a historiographical-literary level. This might lead one to understand that the author had a very clear concept of time and history which provides the bedrock or framework for the structure of Ezra and Nehemiah. In what follows, Japhet provides her understanding of the structure and chronology that seemed to have guided the thought of the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah. I have concurred with Japhet's viewpoint on the chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah due to the several factors she has presented in what follows:

Japhet (1994:208-209) asserted that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are structured in two main parts. The first part is Ezra 1-6. This period deals with Cyrus' decree in the first year of his reign and ends with the dedication of the temple in the sixth year of the reign of Darius (Ezr 6:15). The period covered a span of twenty-two years, that is, from 538 BCE to 517 BCE.

The second part is Ezra 7 to Nehemiah 13. This period deals with the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezr 7:7), and continues to the arrival and work of Nehemiah in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes (Neh 1:1; 2:1). This history ended in the thirty-third year of the reign of Artaxerxes (Neh 13:6-7). The period covered a span of twenty-six years, that is, from 458 BCE to 432 BCE.

There are certain similarities that Japhet (1994:208-214) has identified from the above periodization as can be observed in what follows.

- First, each of the periods lasts only one generation, that is, between twenty and thirty years.
- Second, in each of these periods, the people are led by two men. In the first period, Zerubbabel and Jeshua led the community; in the second period, Ezra and Nehemiah led the community.
- Third, the two periods are marked by the major projects. The rebuilding of the temple marked the first period while the rebuilding of the city wall marked the second period.

Japhet however acknowledged the complexities in the author's choice and organization of sources which were available to him/her. Notwithstanding, she explained the rationality behind the historiographical method and time sequence adopted by the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah. She stated that the author(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to highlight this central fact which is, "change and renewal in the life of Judah were the result of initiative on the part of the Persian kings and the Jews of Babylonia, rather than any action in Judah itself, whether political or spiritual. God extended grace to Israel-that is, to those who returned from exile-by means of the kings of Persia" (Japhet 1994:216).

Following from the above explanation, Japhet (1994:216) asserted that in dealing with Ezra and Nehemiah, one must understand the chronological sequence of events as complementary to the composition of the sources

even though they both differ from each other. In this regard, the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah had opted to deal with the two subjects in their mutual relation in order to express their common theological viewpoint. Today, the argument on the chronology of the events in Ezra and Nehemiah still seem to be hanging in the balance but evidently the weight of the argument appears to be in favour of the traditional view which Japhet has proposed from above (cf Breneman 1993:42-46).

Another aspect concerns the sources that were used for the composition of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Despite the diversity of views concerning the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah, there seem to be a general agreement by a number of scholars³⁸ on the sources that were used for the composition of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Though, there are a few differences on minor details, I will sketch in general, the sources, according to the various viewpoints of the scholars named from the preceding footnote. The table below describes the probable sources which were used for the composition or compilation of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Table 1. Sources used for the composition of Ezra and Nehemiah

SN	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
1	A historical review	Ezr 1-6
2	Ezra's memoirs	Ezr 7-10 and Neh 8-10 (NB: 9-10 is debated) ³⁹

³⁸ Grabbe (1998b:125- 182); Dillard & Longman III (1994:181); Japhet (1994:190) Breneman (1993:35-41) and Williamson (1985:xxiii-xxxiii, 1987:14-36).

³⁹ See Breneman (993:35, 38-40) and Clines (1984:4-9). There is debate among the above mentioned scholars concerning Nehemiah 8-10. A number of scholars agree that Nehemiah 8

3	Nehemiah's memoirs	Neh 1-7 and 11-13 (Neh 9-10 is debated)
4	Lists	Ezr 1:9-11; 2; 7; 8:1-14; Neh 3; 10:18-43; 11:3-36; 12:1-26
5	Letters	Ezr 1:2-4; 4:11-22; 5:7-17; 6:2-22; 7:12-26

On a whole, the sources which were used during the composition of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah have been broadly accepted among scholars as shown from the table above. Much of the sources were derived from Ezra's and Nehemiah's memoirs. Some of the lists were found from previous records. The final editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah, whoever he/she might have been, had gathered these pre-existing memoirs, lists, letters, et cetera, and may have put them together. The most probable person(s) were Ezra, Nehemiah or their associates, the Chronicler or both. This exploration will therefore limit itself to the above mentioned broad contours of the sources.

2.5 SHESHBAZZAR AND ZERUBBABEL

The relationship between Sheshbazzar⁴⁰ (Ezr 1:8, 11; 5:14, 16) and Zerubbabel⁴¹ (3:8; 4:2-3; 5:2 cf Hag 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21) is also a matter of

belongs to Ezra memoirs. Other scholars such as Williamson (1985:xxviii) consider Nehemiah 9-10 as part of the Ezra memoirs. This matter has been left unresolved.

⁴⁰ A Babylonian name, *sassu-aba-usur* meaning "May Shamash [the sun god] protects the father [of this child]" (cf Albertz 2003:120; Williamson 1985:5 and Klein 1999:679) or 'Sin protects the son' (cf Brockington 1969:50-51).

⁴¹ Hebrew *zerubabel* or Akkadian *zer-babili* meaning "offspring of [born in] Babylon" (cf Albertz 2003:120; Meyers 1987:1088; McKenzie 1976:952).

scholarly concern from Ezra and Nehemiah. Who are these two figures? Do the names refer to one person or to separate individuals?

Those who argue that these names refer to one person point out the following reasons. First, that both had been accredited to the laying of the foundation of the temple (cf Ezr 3:8; 4:3; 5:16). Second, that both had exercised a certain form of leadership among the first group of returnees (cf Ezr 1:11; 2:2; 3:2, 8; 4:2-4; 5:14). Third, that the name Sheshbazzar probably was an imperial/court name while Zerubbabel was for Jewish setting just as Belteshazzar was an imperial name for Daniel (cf Kidner 1979:139-146).

A similar biblical account is cited to support the view that both names refer to a single person. It is suggested that Azariah and Uzziah are used interchangeably in 2 Kings 15 to refer to one person but the author(s)/narrator(s) do not point out this relationship in an obvious manner (cf 2 Ki 15:1-2, 7, 13, 30, 32-34). The reader could only figure out this fact by reading the whole of chapter 15 closely.

A contrary argument to the above viewpoint is that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two separate individuals (cf Klein 1999:679; Kidner 1979:139-146). The reasons for this viewpoint are as follows:

First, that Zerubbabel and his fellow leaders are quoted to have referred to Sheshbazzar as a figure of the past⁴².

⁴² "Also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from

Second, that Sheshbazzar had returned to Judah with the first batch while Zerubbabel came back with the second batch during the reign of Darius I (522-486 BC) prior to Ezra's return. Unfortunately, the editor(s), because of his own personal reasons merged the first and second returns of the Babylonian exiles into one. Williamson (2004:13-14) supports the viewpoint that these are two separate figures but that Zerubbabel may have accompanied Sheshbazzar back to Jerusalem on the first return and may have worked under his authority until he succeeded Sheshbazzar as governor at the order of Cambyses.

Third, that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the official and unofficial leaders respectively of the first batch of returnees. So, when it came to the matters of dealing with the imperial court, Sheshbazzar functioned in such matters. However, Zerubbabel functioned in the Jewish settings particularly, on matters concerning the prophetic utterances, until he was officially appointed to the governorship of Judah after the sudden disappearance of Sheshbazzar (cf Kidner 1979: 141).

In what follows, I will argue in support of the viewpoint that both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are the names of one person because of several reasons.

the temple of Babylon and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor" (Ezr 5:14 NASB) .

- Sheshbazzar assumed a certain form of leadership

Sheshbazzar is referred to as the prince/leader of Judah and as a result, he is given the temple articles to be taken to Judah (cf Ezr 1:8, 11). He led the first group of exiles to return to Judah. Therefore, whether he was a tribal leader or the governor of Judah, it is certain that he had assumed some form of leadership role among the early returned exiles. He had also contributed to laying down the foundation of the temple. Similarly, Zerubbabel also is accredited with a certain form of leadership responsibility as well as laying the foundation of the temple (cf Ezr 3:2, 8; 4:2-3; 5:2; Hag 1:1, 12-15). He is therefore listed among the first group who had returned from Babylon to Judah (cf Ezr 2:2; Neh 7:7). These reported similarities of Sheshbazzar's and Zerubbabel's responsibilities during the early post-exilic period can never be accidental. This can better be explained by viewing the two figures as one, rather than as two separate individuals.

- Sheshbazzar is omitted in the list of returnees (Ezr 2:1-70; Neh 7:6-73)

If Sheshbazzar was not the same person as Zerubbabel, why did the narrator choose to include the name of Zerubbabel without listing the name of Sheshbazzar from the list of the returnees (cf Ezr 2:1-70; Neh 7:6-73)? How could one account for this unprecedented omission of Sheshbazzar's name when he was duly recognized as one of the prominent leaders during the early post-exilic period (cf Ezr 1:8, 11; 5:14, 16)? There are however two possible explanations. The first explanation could be that Sheshbazzar was not a native-born Jew. Therefore, it was logically appropriate to exclude him

from the list of the returned Jewish exiles. This explanation obviously is a matter of speculation because if he was a non-Jew, why chose to credit him with the laying of the temple foundation, leadership role of some sort or the carrying of the temple articles to Judah (cf Ezr 1:8, 11; 5:14-16)? These are unlikely responsibilities to assign to a non-Jew, particularly at a time when the identity of the new community was being redefined and narrowed down (cf Ezr 4:3).

Therefore, the second explanation to the unusual omission of Sheshbazzar's name from the list of the returnees is, in my opinion, that he was probably the same person as Zerubbabel. This appears to be the only probable alternative reason that could account for the outright omission of the name of Sheshbazzar from the list of those who had returned from the Babylonian exile to Judah. As it has been suggested previously, the narrator(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah used the name 'Sheshbazzar' in imperial/court settings while maintaining the name 'Zerubbabel' for the Jewish context for certain reasons unknown to us.

2.6 BOOK OF THE LAW

Another subject of scholarly investigation is the book of the Law or Moses' law book (Ezr 3:2; 7:6, 10-14, 21, 25-26; Neh 8:1-10, 13-15, 18 etc). Is this law book similar to the present canonical Pentateuch? Is it the P source, the book of Deuteronomy, an unidentified law book or is it a lost book? There are differing viewpoints on this law book (cf Becking 2003: 22-26; Breneman

1993:47-48, 91; Williamson 1985:xxxvii-xxxix). But the majority of the scholars⁴³ have supported the view that the Law book or the book of Moses mentioned in various parts of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah "included parts, at least, of both D[euteronomy] and P[riestly Sources], in which case it was similar to, if not yet fully identical with, our Pentateuch" (Williamson 1985: xxxviii-xxxix).

My opinion is similar to the above mentioned viewpoint because of the reasons stated below. First, I support Breneman (1993:48) who argued that there is nothing specific in Ezra and Nehemiah which will suggest that this law book was just a fragment of some law codes. He pointed out that all parts of the Pentateuch are found in the Ezra and Nehemiah narratives.

Second, I also agree with Breneman's observation that the Pentateuch would never have been accepted by the Samaritans with so much enthusiasm if it had been a work recently presented by Ezra⁴⁴. This explains why the Prophets and the Writings were refuted by the Samaritans because of the recency of the materials in question (cf Kidner 1979:159). I, therefore, conclude that the book of the Law or the Law of Moses referred to from various parts of Ezra and Nehemiah included the whole of, or at least a substantial part of the Pentateuch as we have it today (cf Graham 1998:206).

⁴³ Cf Klein (1999:800), Breneman (1993:48), Williamson (1985: xxxviii-xxxix) and Brockington (1969:91).

⁴⁴ As we had already indicated previously, the Samaritans appeared to have been a group which were dissatisfied with the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah. As such, it would have been very difficult for this group to have accepted the Pentateuch if it were edited substantially by Ezra (Soggin 2001:175).

2.7 OWNERSHIP OF THE LAND OF JUDAH

The ownership of the land of Judah also is a source of concern in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Evidences from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah suggest that the land belonged to the *golah* (exile) community who had returned from Babylon to Judah (cf Ezr 2:1, 70-3:1; 4:3; 9:1-2; 10:10-11, 19; Neh 2:20; 9:2; 10:28-30; 13:1-3). Those who had remained in the land during the Babylonian exile have been ignored, forgotten or even pushed aside. The question therefore is “who owns the land?” Is it the exiles, the non-exiles or both? On what basis were those who remained in the land during the exile period considered as foreigners? To answer this question, we have argued in a subsequent section that the concept of ‘Yahweh's people’ might have been the underlying factor behind this redefinition of the Judean population and the ensuing exclusion of the non-exiles from the land of Judah and from the religious and social activities of the newly returned exiles (cf Smith 1996:547-556). We shall take up this matter in chapter five where the text of Ezra and Nehemiah is explored in greater depth.

2.8 ADMINISTRATIVE STATUS OF THE STATE OF JUDAH

Another important concern in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the establishment of Judah as an independent state or province. Was Judah an independent state prior to the arrival of Nehemiah or was it under the auspices of the state of Samaria? Evidences from Ezra and Nehemiah are not conclusive as to the nature of the administration of the state of Judah during the Persian period. Hence Williamson (2004:6) indicated that Ezra and

Nehemiah were not written primarily for historical interests; as a result, scholars who are bent on reading the materials for historical purpose(s) will find these materials very frustrating. Consequently, Williamson (2004:6) argues that the constitutional status of Judah and the position of its leaders can hardly be discerned from the Ezra-Nehemiah materials.

However, it appears from a close reading of the text of Ezra and Nehemiah that Judah had a certain form of political or administrative independence during or immediately after the exile (cf Williamson 2004:11). A few biblical texts (Ezr 2:1; 5:14; Hg 1:1) have been cited in this regard by Williamson in order to support his viewpoint. First, that Judah has been referred to as *medinah* (province or district) by Ezra 2:1. Second, that two officials (Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar) have been referred to as *pehach* (governor) by Ezra 5:14 and Haggai 1:1. These two evidences suggest that Judah had at least a certain form of administrative independence headed by a governor prior to the arrival of Nehemiah. Accordingly, the following regions or districts are said to have made up the province of Judah; these included Jerusalem, Beth-hakkerem, Mizpah, Beth-zur, Keilah and Jericho (cf Williamson 2004:15).

Meanwhile, the state of Samaria also appeared to have assumed some form of a temporary administrative control over the affairs of the Judean region prior to the appointment and arrival of Nehemiah as governor (cf Williamson 2004:18; Boccaccini 2002:83-84). The presumption is that Tobiah, the junior

colleague to Sanballat, the governor of Samaria may have received a temporary appointment as the governor of Judah following the disturbances recorded in Ezra 4. His temporary appointment may well explain why he had close ties to Jerusalem. But Tobiah's appointment may have come to an end when Nehemiah assumed office as the governor of Judah.

The temporary administrative control of Samaria over Judah prior to the arrival of Nehemiah could explain why the governors and priests of Judah had to receive letters from the Persian central government in order to deliver them to the trans-Euphrates leaders concerning the affairs of the Judean region. So, it is likely that even though the Judean region possessed a certain form of administrative independence during and after the exile, the state of Samaria also exercised some level of temporary control at some point over the affairs of the Judean region (cf Breneman 1993:25-26, 31; Williamson 2004:33-35).

2.9 THEOLOGY OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

There is no question that the theology of Ezra-Nehemiah is so divergent that it can hardly be summarized in a single sentence (Williamson 1985:xlvi). In view of this complexity, a number of scholars⁴⁵ have speculated on what is the core theology of Ezra and Nehemiah. Obviously, their perception of this theology varies from one aspect to the other. In my attempt to discern these theological motifs, I have discovered some of the following major themes that

⁴⁵ Clines (1984:25-31); Eskenazi (1988:1); Breneman (1993: 50-58); Green (1993); Kraemer (1993: 83-90) and Klein (1999:668-671).

have been suggested by scholars as the contours of the theology of Ezra and Nehemiah.

2.9.1 Movement theology

One of the theological motifs in Ezra and Nehemiah represents the viewpoint of Eskenazi (1988:1). As I see it, it could better be described as a 'Movement theology'. Eskenazi (1988:1) noted that there are three theological motifs in Ezra and Nehemiah. These have been transformed from the pre-exilic period to the post-exilic era. The three themes to his movement theology include:

- A movement from the time of elite leaders to a time of community (post-exilic Jewish community).
- A time of narrow holiness to a time of encompassing holiness.
- A time of oral authority to a time of the authority of written documents (cf Dillard and Longman III 1994:186).

The three contours of this movement theology are explained in what follows:

- Elite leaders to a time of community

Eskenazi explained that in this circumstance, the Old Testament was previously concerned with individuals such as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, and Daniel, et cetera. The community of the pre-exilic Israel was not the focal point of attention. However, in the post-exilic period, particularly in Ezra and Nehemiah, the attention was moved from the elite leaders to the returning Jewish community as a whole. The community had taken precedence over individual figures. For example, it is the community that

rebuilds the altar (cf Ezr 3:1-6), the temple (cf Ezr 3:7-13; 6:13-15) and the wall (cf Neh 3:1-32; 6:15-16). It is the community that requested the law to be read so they could hear it (cf Neh 8:1-8).

This first part to Eskenazi's movement theology concerning Ezra and Nehemiah could be accepted with some reservation. He argues that in the pre-exilic period, the community of Israel was not the centre of attention; rather, it was individual figures such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon, et cetera who were centre of attention. This is simply not the case. The Israelite community in the pre-exilic period was also at the centre of the events that had transpired within and around them. For example, the call and commission of Moses to deliver the Israelites from Egypt (cf Ex 2:23-3:22) was initiated by Yahweh, just as King Cyrus was appointed by Yahweh to initiate the return and restoration of the Jewish exiles (cf Ezr 1:1-11). In both of these redemptive episodes, the heart and mind of Yahweh was on the community of Israel as a whole, not just on the individuals like Moses, Joshua, Cyrus or Ezra, as Eskenazi may have wanted us to believe.

In addition, the construction of the tabernacle (cf Ex 35:1-40:38) and the temple (cf 1 Ki 6:1-8:66) was a team effort during the pre-exilic period just as it was a team effort during the early post-exilic period (cf Ezr 3:1-4:24; 6:1-22; Neh 3:1-4:23; 6:1-15). In all these building projects, the leaders were recognized for their wonderful leadership skills. Moses, Solomon, Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Nehemiah, et cetera were all acknowledged for their leadership abilities in both pre- and post-exilic periods. Yet, this personal

acknowledgement was not intended to obscure the work done by their respective communities.

- Narrow holiness to a time of encompassing holiness

Eskenazi (1988:1) contended that in the early post-exilic period, the concept of holiness was no longer restricted to a single place, possibly the temple; rather, it was extended to include the city and its wall, as well as, the community as a whole. This explained why the altar, the temple, and the city wall were consecrated when they were completed (cf Ezr 3:1-13; 6:13-18; Neh 12:27-47). In the end, we have a holy people dwelling in a holy city with a holy God.

- Oral authority to a time of written authority

Eskenazi (1988:1) asserted that there is a shift from oral authority to written documents in Ezra and Nehemiah. It is so astounding to see how written documents such as letters, edicts and law codes, et cetera, controlled and drove the political, economic, religious, and social landscape of this post-exilic community. The kings of Persia initiated the return of the exiles, the rebuilding of the temple, and the city wall, through written edicts and letters. Ezra and Nehemiah rallied the community to become a united political and religious force by re-interpreting and re-applying the written documents, especially the law of their God (or of Moses) in order to address their present circumstances (cf Breneman 1993:52-53). In the perspective of Eskenazi, the above mentioned theological streams summarized the content of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

2.9.2 Rebuilding of two walls

Contrary to the perception of Eskenazi, Green (1993:206-215) sees the theology of Ezra and Nehemiah in a different light. He understood Ezra and Nehemiah as being a theology of the rebuilding of two walls: the religious and the physical (cf Dillard and Longman III 1994:187). On the one hand, Nehemiah's wall physically separated the holy people of God from the unclean gentiles, who are understood to have been their enemies. On the other hand, Ezra's religious wall is the law of God. Ezra is commanded to teach the people of God this law. The law of God inevitably excluded the gentiles and those who were unclean from associating with the holy people of God in religious matters and social activities (cf Breneman 1993:51-52).

2.9.3 Theology of continuity

Meanwhile, another important theology of Ezra and Nehemiah can better be described as the 'theology of continuity'. One scholar who saw Ezra and Nehemiah as containing the theology of continuity is Breneman (1993:50-58). According to him, there are a number of theological pathways in Ezra and Nehemiah. Some of these theological motifs I have already mentioned. However, Breneman's theological motifs which have not been discussed include:

- The continuity of God's plan and the people.
- The centrality of worship and prayer.
- The narration of God's active participation in the history of the world in order to shape it to His desired goal.

I will discuss each of the above theological motifs separately.

- Continuity of God's plan and the people

Breneman (1993:50) explained that one of the major theological objectives of Ezra and Nehemiah is to show that there is continuity between Israel's past history and the present. Both Ezra and Nehemiah showed that institutions such as the temple (cf Ezr 5:2, 11, 15; 6:7), the altar (cf Ezr 3:3), the wall (cf Neh 6:15-16), and festivals, such as, the celebration of the Passover, and the feast of tabernacles (cf Ezr 3:3-5; Neh 8:14; 12:24, 45), et cetera, were representatives of the previous pre-exilic institutions of Israel. So, the fact that similar institutions existed in the post-exilic period can sustain the argument that the previous period and its institutions have continued into the present and therefore have legitimized the present post-exilic period and its institutions and structures (cf Kidner 1979:21; Clines 1984:25-26; Williamson 1985:li; Throntveit 1992:11; Klein 1999:668).

- Centrality of worship and prayer

Another theological motif identified in Ezra and Nehemiah is the centrality of religious worship and prayer (cf Kidner 1979:24-26; Clines 1984:29). The rebuilding of the altar and the temple were specifically intended for religious worship and prayer. Sacrifices were also offered on the altar to God for religious purposes. The returned community celebrated the Passover and the feast of tabernacles. All of these things including the reading of the law became religious experiences. Similarly, the activities of private and congregational prayers were at the heart of the ministry of Ezra (cf Ezr 9) and

Nehemiah (cf Neh 9). Both leaders started their journey with prayer and sustained their mission with prayer. Clines (1984:30) argued that all these religious experiences were done for the glory of Yahweh, the God of Israel. These religious experiences were not meant to be an end in themselves. The goal was to glorify Yahweh in all things, hence the phrase: “we will not neglect the house of our God” (Neh 10:39).

- God’s role in history

Breneman (1993:54-55) also highlighted another theological concept which is part of the theology of Ezra and Nehemiah. According to him, Ezra and Nehemiah teach that God actively participates in and controls the history of the world to his desired end. He reiterated that Ezra and Nehemiah had shown that history is not a combination of meaningless, isolated events. History is neither a juxtaposition of purposeless events nor uncoordinated activities of the universe and its inhabitants. Rather, it is God who is actively controlling history. He is driving it to his desired goal particularly for the redemption of his people. This explained why God controlled the history of such kingdoms as Babylonia and Persia, et cetera to accomplish his purpose for disciplining and restoring his people, Israel. Williamson (1985:1) adds a related theological spin that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah take a positive perspective toward foreign rule by affirming the notion that there is a possibility of God’s people living a faithful life under foreign rule.

2.9.4 Theologies of crying, intermarriage, covenant, retribution and Torah

Kraemer (1993:83-90) also proposes some other motifs that seem to be contained within the books of Ezra and Nehemiah but these motifs are subsumed in the themes that have already been mentioned. He talks about other theological themes present in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, such as, the concept of crying (cf Ezr 3:12-13; 9:3-4; 10:1; Neh 1:4; 2:2; 5:1,6; 8:9), opposition to God's work (cf Ezr 4:4-5,24; Neh 5:7-8), intermarriage (cf Ezr 9:1-2; Neh 13:23-28), covenant (cf Ezr 10:3; Neh 9:8; 13:29), sin and punishment, and Torah (cf Ezr 3:2; 7:6, 10, 26 9:10-11; Neh 8:1-18).

Kraemer contended that the above mentioned concepts or themes are very pervasive in Ezra and Nehemiah; as a result, they contribute immensely to the establishment and restoration of the religious and social life of the post-exilic-community. Certainly, the above mentioned theological concepts are prevalent in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and this is illustrated above. However, this study will not elaborate in detail on these theological subjects. Rather, the following discussion will integrate some of these themes in a way that the concepts can be better understood. In other words, for the moment, I will discuss specifically the tension between the returned exiles and the supposed foreigners during the early post-exilic period in Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as, the factors that may have contributed to that tension.

2.10 FACTORS BEHIND THE TENSION IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH

One concern that has defined the point of departure of this investigation is the contestation between the returned Jewish exiles (who apparently saw themselves almost exclusively as ‘Yahweh’s people’) versus the non-exiles (who were perceived as ‘non-Yahweh’s people’) on the conception of ‘Yahweh’s people’ during the early post-exilic period⁴⁶. Grabbe (1998b:100) holds a similar viewpoint concerning this tension. He argues that one of the central themes from Ezra and Nehemiah is the threat to the exile community by foreigners or peoples of the land. He explained that this threat surfaced at several points in Ezra and Nehemiah namely, during the rebuilding of the temple (cf Ezr 4-6); through intermarriage with foreign women under Ezra (cf Ezr 9-10); through a coalition led by Sanballat, Tobiah and Gershem against Nehemiah and the work of rebuilding the wall; as well as, through the foreign intermarriages (cf Neh 9-10; 13:1-3, 23-31). Grabbe reiterated that the counter theme here is that only the returnees were true members of the community, the true Israelites; and that anyone who had not gone to exile had no claim on Yahweh, or on the temple or on the land of Judah. What follows is a closer examination of some of the matters that reveal the intensity of this conflict.

⁴⁶ Some scholars (cf Williamson 1985:li) have affirmed a similar tension but from a relatively different perspective. The two parties are regarded as “theocratic versus eschatological groups” by Williamson. He argued that on the one hand, the theocratic party exhibits subservient attitude to foreign rule while still maintaining faithfulness to Yahweh, the law and its institutions. On the other hand, the eschatological party appears to be completely dissatisfied with the present situation, thereby looking for or even working for the overthrow of foreign rule in order to establish an independent or messianic kingdom.

2.10.1 Prohibition of intermarriage

One of the areas where this contestation is immediately self-revealing, as I have already indicated above, is on the prohibition of intermarriage in Ezra and Nehemiah. There are specific passages both from Ezra and Nehemiah that have described the tension between the *golah* community and the rest of the people concerning intermarriage, for example Ezra 9:1-10:44; and Nehemiah 13:3-4, 23-28. The entire last two chapters of the book of Ezra have been dedicated to the stories of intermarriages to underscore the seriousness of this problem. Ezra appears to have exhausted every atom of his energy (body, soul and spirit) in order to remedy this situation. His restless attitude drew the attention of a large number of the returned exiles. These, vowed to separate from their foreign wives and children. Unfortunately for Ezra's point of view, not everyone was comfortable with this proposed divorce solution (cf Ezr 10:15 and Van Wyk & Breytenbach 2001:1256). The Ezra texts appeal to Yahweh's commandments, via his servants and prophets, as well as to Yahweh's covenant, as the basis for the harsh separation of marriages and families (cf Ezr 9:10-12, 14; 10:4-5).

Similarly, Nehemiah took a decisive measure against those who had intermarried with foreigners (cf Neh 13:23-28). Nehemiah brutally handled the matter as attested in his own memoirs.⁴⁷ It seems obvious that the issue of

⁴⁷ "25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves..." 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me" (Ezr 13:25, 28).

intermarriage had generated a lot of disagreement because a large number of people had intermarried with other peoples of the land. The outrageous reaction by the two figures, Ezra and Nehemiah, also shows that the problem was a pervasive one.

Consequently, one is forced to ask a number of questions: why did intermarriage become a controversial matter among these returned exiles? What was the motivation behind the ruthless divorce approach undertaken by Ezra and supposedly by Nehemiah? Could these unsympathetic marriage reforms be appropriately justified?

In search of possible solutions to this maze of marriage reforms, some scholars (cf Wolfendale 1974:143-144; Clines 1984:116-118; Klein 1999:732-733) assert that the intermarriage prohibitions in Ezra and Nehemiah were motivated by the concern to protect the monotheistic character of Judaism against the powerful syncretistic polytheism which was prevalent during the Persian period.

The post-exilic community was a small island in a great sea of peoples and religious traditions. As a consequence, it was pertinent that the covenant community remained pure in doctrine, customs, and ethical norms. Ezra's and Nehemiah's actions may have appeared harsh, but Ezra and Nehemiah reveal to us how imperative it was in God's plan that this covenant community

continue. If this assimilation continued unchecked, then, it would have meant the end of the community (Breneman 1993:52).

However, other scholars like Williamson (1985:l-li)⁴⁸ disagree with the above perception. Instead, Williamson contended that the intermarriage prohibition was motivated by Jewish racial prejudice. Maccoby (1996:156-157) clearly refutes this accusation on the ground that racism is based on racial superiority; but there is no trace in Israel's history which indicates that the Jews thought they were a superior race.

In my judgement, the prevalence of so many family lists from Ezra (cf 2:1-67; 8:1-14; 10:18-43), and from Nehemiah (cf Neh 3:1-32; 7:1-73; 10:1-27; 11:3-12:26), as well as, the emphasis on the exiles as the 'holy race' (cf Ezr 9:1-2) appeared to have contradicted Maccoby's argument (cf Smith 1996:556).

In other words, it is difficult to dismiss the charge of racism against Ezra and Nehemiah when one sees the prevalence of all these family lists of the returned exiles as well as their emphasis on the holiness of their race. Consequently, it is hard to overlook the accusation that racial prejudice was part of the motivation for the prohibition of intermarriage by Ezra and Nehemiah.

During Williamson's (1985:l-li) discussion on the theological message of Ezra and Nehemiah, he also observed that race and religion characterized this

⁴⁸ Cf also Maccoby (1996:156-157), though Maccoby himself shares an opposite view.

post-exilic Jewish community rather than nationality. According to him, “the Jewish community is urged to observe a strict program of separation in order to maintain its identity...[This] is found in each of the four great sections of these books, and is the source of much of the opposition which the people faced” (Williamson 1985:1-11). With this firm conviction, Williamson (1985:132) insisted that it is difficult to reject the viewpoint that the post-exilic Jews saw themselves as racially different from their neighbours. Ezra misapplied the concept of the seed of Abraham-the elect (holy people) of God (not for their racial superiority) to be a blessing for other nations (Gn 12:3, 7; Dt 7:6-7), but he has turned this to racial prejudice.

2.10.2 Women in Ezra 9-10

Another event that reveals the tension between the returned exiles and others is the expulsion of women from the post-exilic community in Ezra 9-10. Janzen (2002:2-3) argues that the social consciousness of the returned exiles enabled them to view these women as dangerous. As a consequence, their expulsion was necessary in order to purge away the danger they had posed. Janzen reasoned that the expulsion of these women was a ritualized act of purification or more pointedly, a witch-hunt which was a purification ritual. But Janzen did not address the question of whether these women were truly foreigners as presupposed in Ezra 9-10 or whether they were Judeans who did not go into exile. This discussion will therefore consider this question below.

Previously, Eskenazi and Judd (1994:266-285) discussed this matter in their research work. Eskenazi and Judd did a research on the sociological and theological classification of the strange women in Ezra 9-10. Their findings seemed to suggest that the women classified in Ezra 9-10 as strangers were not really strangers as is sometimes supposed. According to Eskenazi and Judd, these women may have been Judahites or some of the Israelites who had never gone into either the Assyrian or the Babylonian exile (cf Grabbe 2000a:15). So, because of this the early Jewish returnees may have seen these women as appropriate marriage partners. This assumption is also sustained by the fact that Ezra 9:1-2 does not identify these women with certainty to be Ammonites or Canaanites people. In fact, they were not. Rather, these women seem to be identified as foreigners primarily on the basis of a new definition of foreigners found in Ezra. As a result, they were unjustly excluded from the early post-exilic community (cf Eskenazi and Judd 1994:285).

What kind of conclusion can be drawn from Eskenazi and Judd's research findings? My position is that there are several implications which could be deduced from their research findings.

- First, it can hardly be proven from the text of Ezra 9-10 that these women were foreigners or Ammonites/Canaanites.
- Second, these women seemed to have not returned from exile, rather, they were in the land during and after the exile; which was the reason why they were classified (identified) as the 'peoples of the land' (cf Ezr 9:1-2).

- Third, the fact that Ezra and Nehemiah attempted to redefine the concept of ‘the people of Yahweh’ to mean the returning exiles exclusively, inevitably rendered these women as ‘non-Yahweh’s people’ and therefore foreigners. In the viewpoint of Ezra and Nehemiah, they could not have intermarried with the Jewish returned exiles.

Stahl (1988:107-111) suggested that there is ambivalence about intermarriage in biblical texts. As a result, one cannot generally say a definitive word about intermarriage between Jews and foreigners (cf Grabbe 1998a). He cited several of Israel’s figures who had married foreign women or men. For example, Joseph, Moses, David, and Esther (who married a Persian king) had interracial marriages. These inter-racial marriages suggest to Stahl that there was a permissive attitude in previous generations in Israel until the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

2.10.3 Identity and attitude of the Samaritans

The tension between the returned Jewish exiles and the rest of the people is portrayed through the identity and attitude of the Samaritans in general⁴⁹. It appeared from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that some of the returned exiles seemed to have found it difficult to come to terms with the identity and attitude of their Samaritan neighbours. A similar observation has been made by Williamson (2004:23) who argues,

⁴⁹ There appear to be a number of viewpoints about the origin and identity of the Samaritans according to Soggin (2001:175). One view which Soggin highlights is that the Samaritans are a group of Jews who fled from Ezra and Nehemiah’s marriage reforms from the southern part of Israel to the northern region during the fifth century BC. This group did not want to separate from their foreign wives or alliances. So, they migrated to Samaria and established their cultic life on mount Gerizim where their temple also was built (cf Williamson 2004:23-24).

“it is clear beyond a shadow of doubt that throughout the Persian period there continued to be fundamental differences of opinion within Judah concerning the attitude which should be adopted towards the descendants of the former northern kingdom of Israel”

Nevertheless, Cogan (1988:286- 292) pointed out that what is found in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the Samaritans is different from what is in Chronicles. According to him, the accounts from Ezra and Nehemiah are a report of the *golah* community who were struggling to re-establish their cultic life in Jerusalem. This group literally advocated separation from foreigners and encouraged purity of the post-exilic community.

On the contrary, the audiences from the book of Chronicles were very open and receptive to non-exiles or non-Jews. They were willing to integrate the non-Israelites in their communal and religious life, particularly, in the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. But in the eyes of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Samaritans were a tainted race, so their allegiance to Yahweh was questionable, given their alleged religious syncretism. Some of the newly returned exiles, including Ezra and Nehemiah, found it appalling to relate with the Samaritans in their religious life and communal living. Consequently, the radical isolationist policy of Ezra was an attempt to counter the wide-spread conviction and practice of a broad and conciliatory approach towards foreign relations (Williamson 2004:23). Therefore, one needs to understand from the above viewpoints why the theological conception of ‘Yahweh’s people’ also might have become one of the main sources of the tension during the early post-exilic period in Ezra and Nehemiah.

2.10.4 Concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’

What appears to be the decisive factor that precipitated the tension in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah was not racial prejudice only. Rather, it seemed that the conception of ‘Yahweh’s people’ in Ezra and Nehemiah during the early post-exilic period was behind the conflict. On the one hand, Ezra, Nehemiah and some of the returning exiles seemed to have held a conception that the returning exiles were exclusively ‘Yahweh’s people’. Based on this assumption, Ezra and Nehemiah thought that the returning exiles should not have intermarried with the rest of the other people of the land. These people were not regarded as ‘Yahweh’s people’. In the perspective of Ezra and Nehemiah, intermarriage with the people of the land constituted a defilement of the holy race as well as a breaking of the holy covenant between Yahweh and his people (cf Ezr 9:2; Neh 9:2).

On the other hand, certain returned exiles and non-exiles as well as other people living in and around Judah apparently conceived the idea that ‘Yahweh’s people’ not only included the returned exiles but also the non-exiles and essentially any person who embraced Yahweh as their God. In this perspective, those who embraced Yahweh as their God ought to have been considered as appropriate marriage partners with the returned exiles irrespective of their racial, social or ethnic differences. This second perspective appeared to have contrasted negatively with the perspective of Ezra, Nehemiah and some other returned exiles; hence the reason for the tension between the two perspectives becomes apparent. This is my premise

concerning the root cause of the tension between the returned exiles and the rest of the people who lived in and around Judah during and after the exile. This viewpoint forms a major part of this investigation.

2.11 SYNTHESIS

It has been argued from the preceding discussion that the concept of 'Yahweh's people' lay behind the tension between the returned exiles and the alleged foreigners. This is rarely acknowledged by scholarly investigations on Ezra and Nehemiah. Whatever the factor(s) that might have sustained this limited acknowledgement or academic gap/oversight, this research is partly aimed at narrowing this discourse gap. This study therefore examines and describes the tension between the alleged foreigners and the returning exiles during the early post-exilic period. This is dealt with in chapter five.

Meanwhile, I have examined the Ancient Near Eastern treaty pattern and the Abrahamic/Mosaic covenants in the proceeding chapter. Ezra and Nehemiah premised their exclusive religious reforms on both covenants. Therefore, connections are made between the events in Ezra and Nehemiah and the Abrahamic/Mosaic covenants as depicted in the Pentateuch.

Furthermore, I have shown in chapter four that there is a covenant framework through which Israel and other nations could be regarded as 'Yahweh's people'. In other words, the chapter describes the inclusive theological perspective of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants on the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations, foreigners and aliens.