

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

A preacher once said that a person without a vision is a person without a future; and a person without a future will always return to his or her past.¹ This statement is closely related to what Barna (1996:104-105) said that visionless people view change as a threat to their comfort zone. They live in denial of the future; and as such, they wed their life to the past and the present which seem to be familiar to their experience. Such people long and remember the way things used to be (the good old days). One with a vision has to develop a great deal of patience and endurance before he or she may live with such a visionless person.

The above description of visionless people is true to a large extent but not in all circumstances. First, if we take it at face value, it may suggest that anyone who turns to the past is without a vision. This is simply not true. Second, it may also mean that the past is completely irrelevant for our present and subsequent usage. This too is not a valid assumption.

¹ The researcher watched the preacher (his name is forgotten by the researcher at the time this research was written) on a video titled: "Millennium 2000" prepared by the Great Commission Movement from the United States. The video tape was prepared to educate Christians to develop a vision for the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world.

On the contrary, it is self-evident that the past is good and valid as is the present and the future.² We need the past, the present as well as the future to be able to function well in any given society. So, I learned from my experience that we study history in order that we may know the past, shape or correct the present and therefore prepare for the future. From this understanding, Keto (2001:xi, 3-5) was right when he argued that the knowledge of the past “assists societies to create and recreate their social, cultural and political identities as well as to adopt a preferred vision for the future”. I may add a spiritual or religious category to Keto’s list of identities and would also reiterate that the past also helps one to know, form and shape his or her religious and spiritual identity and plan for the future.

Similarly, the Christian faith in God is rooted in the history of humankind. The faith in God was founded, developed and shaped over thousands of years through divine-human agency (cf Enns 2000:22). This faith in God is based upon word and deed revelation. This revelation has taken place in the history of the world and has been documented in Scripture (Old and New

² This is not to suggest that everything that has happened in the past is good. Many things have happened in the past that are very bad such as slavery, Jewish holocaust, the apartheid system in South Africa, civil war in Nigeria, 1st & 2nd World wars, etc. These are very painful events but are important for us today because these may help us understand the world that we live in. These may also inform and impact our present and future decision making on world peace.

Testaments) for the benefit of the previous, present and future generations of believers in God (Warfield 1927:3-5; 29-33, 429).³

As we observed that history is generally valid, a similar value is found in the historical aspect of the Christian faith in God. This research will therefore deal with the historical aspect of the Christian faith in God as documented in Scripture, particularly, the relationship between non-Jews or foreigners and the early post-exilic Jewish community⁴ found in Ezra and Nehemiah. Historical, religious and social affinity between non-Jews in general and the Jews of the early post-exilic community will be discussed. Attention will also be paid to the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17 as well as God's promise to Abraham concerning the blessing of other nations through him or his seed.⁵ Mention will also be made to certain texts that concern foreigners from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history.⁶ The relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the events that have occurred in Ezra and Nehemiah in relation to other nations will be explored.

³ Cf. Dt 4:9; 6:6-9; 11:19-21; Heb 1:1-2; 2:1-5; 12:25-26; 2 Tm 3:16-17; 2 Pt 1:19-21.

⁴ The early post-exilic Jewish period is said to fall between 538-400 BC (Alberty 1994:437).

⁵ Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

⁶ "Scholars identify the books from Joshua through Kings as the 'Deuteronomic History' or 'Deuteronomistic History' (DH)" (Dillard & Longman III 1994:153-154).

1.2 RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

This research will contribute to the existing literature on Ezra-Nehemiah, concerning the relationship between the newly returned exiles from Babylon to the land of Judah and other people who had not gone into exile including foreigners.

The study will also help readers to understand that the Abrahamic covenant and certain texts from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History provide a framework through which all other nations might be allowed to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel. The researcher hopes that this understanding will shelve the unhealthy religious and communal divides that might exist between similar groups today.

The investigation will enable readers to know how the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah re-interpreted certain texts from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History to support the religious and social reforms during the early post-exilic period.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Much work has been done by scholars on several issues in Ezra-Nehemiah during the last twenty years. Through a brief scan of some of this literature, it seems obvious that little attention has been paid to the issue of the

relationship between foreigners (including those who had not gone to the Babylonian exile) and the early post-exilic Jewish community (those who had returned from the Babylonian exile) in these books.⁷ It is with no doubt to suppose that the issue of other people in relation to those who had returned from exile during the early post-exilic period is very important in many ways and should have deserved much more attention.

First, it may be observed that the issue of foreigners (or the rest of the other people who had not gone to the Babylonian exile) in relation to the early returned exiles from Babylon to Judah is one of the integral motifs that have driven the storyline from the beginning of the book of Ezra through the end of the book of Nehemiah. If one removes the passages⁸ that deal with the relationship between foreigners and the early post-exilic Jewish community from these books, the narratives in the books may become very fragmented such that no one would make any sense out of them.

Second, it is also self-evident from these books that without the participation of certain key foreigners (such as king Cyrus⁹, Artaxerxes, Darius etc) in the initiation of the return of the post-exilic Jewish community and in the

⁷ See the bibliographical references at the end of this dissertation. Most of these references deal with other issues in Ezra-Nehemiah. Only few of them discuss the relation of foreigners or non-Jews to the early post-exilic Jewish community.

⁸ Ezr 1:1-10; 3:7; 4:1- 6:18; 7: 1-28; 8:36- 10: 44; Neh 1:11-2:10, 19-20; 4: 1-23; 6:1-7: 3; 13:1-31

⁹ Strikingly, the role of Cyrus is compared to that of a Davidic King in Roberts (2002:376-377).

rebuilding of the altar, the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem, the community would have achieved virtually very little in the restoration process. It is therefore, very reasonable, to argue that such active participation of foreigners in the restoration of the postexilic Jewish community was of invaluable benefit, not only for the restored community, but also for the interest of the non-exiles (including non-Jews). If such was the case, what was that benefit? To put it theologically, what kind of religious interest would foreigners (including the Jews who had not gone to exile) have achieved given the fact that they had worked so much for the restoration of this returning exile community, the rebuilding of the altar, sanctuary (temple) and city walls of Jerusalem?

Third, the seeming inconsistent attitude of this early post-exilic Jewish community also causes concern for the need to explore the issue of the relationship between non-Jews and the early post-exilic Jewish community. On the one hand, the command to build the temple, erect an altar for the LORD and build the city walls of Jerusalem was initiated and supported by foreign kings (Ezr 1:1-2; 6:1-15; 7:11-26). In addition, other foreigners also helped in providing some building materials for the above projects (Ezr 3:7 cf 1 Ki 5:6-12). During all of these instances, the early post-exilic Jewish community did not resist some of these foreigners from helping them on the restoration process.

On the other hand, the early post-exilic Jewish community refused attempts of some of their neighbours to participate in the rebuilding of those same projects during the same period (Ezr 4:1-24). Why was such a contradiction of attitude among this early post-exilic Jewish community? On what grounds did the community welcome some other foreigners to assist in rebuilding the projects and others excluded from similar access?

Fourth, it may also be argued that other passages in the Old Testament seem to suggest that the relationship between the Jews and non-Jews was not a patent one. Previously, Moses had married a non-Israelite woman (Nm 12:1-3). Other foreigners also were accepted and absorbed in the Jewish community (eg Rahab, Bathsheba, and Ruth etc). A similar openness seemed to be present during King Hezekiah's reign (2 Chr 30:6-12) and during the reign of King Josiah (2 Chr 34:9). In both instances, those who resided in the northern part of Israel (irrespective of their ethnic affiliation) were welcomed to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem and to contribute to the work of repairing the temple, respectively. On this issue, Cogan (1988:291) also observed that "the Chronicler and his audience were prepared to assimilate non-Israelites into the community of the worshipers of the God of Israel". He argued that this sort of openness must have created some tension between the Chronicler and his audience versus Ezra-Nehemiah and their audiences. This seemed openness on the one hand and

exclusiveness on the other hand also calls for the need to explore the relationship between the returned Jewish exiles and foreigners during this early post-exilic period in order to determine the actual state of foreigners in that period.

Fifth, I would like to put the relationship of Jews and foreigners in light of a larger Old Testament context. The issue of the relationship between foreigners and the Jews or Israelites was generally important in the Old Testament context as a whole. The book of Jonah is one example of the struggle for the people of Israel to comprehend the relationship between Yahweh and other nations. One among the defining questions in the book of Jonah and hopefully in Ezra and Nehemiah is: does God care about foreigners or non-Israelites (such as the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh¹⁰) as He does about the Jews or Israelites?

Similarly, it appears from the accounts in Genesis that there is a provision in the covenant promises that God made with Abraham and his subsequent descendants, for foreigners to relate with the Jews.¹¹ Theologically, the nucleus of this promise seems to concern the blessing of other nations including Ishmael (Gn 17:20) through Abraham and his descendants. God's

¹⁰ Jnh 1-4:11... "Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

¹¹ Gn 12:3; 17:4-16, 19; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18; 26: 2-5; 28:13-15.

reaffirmation of this promise with Abraham (Gn 17:4-21; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18), Isaac (Gn 26:2-5), and Jacob (Gn 28:13-15) underscore the seriousness of that promise. It also implies that the promise was probably an irrevocable one.

In view of the above designation that Abraham and his descendants would become the channel through which other nations would receive God's blessing, it implicitly suggests that the blessings of other nations or foreigners would depend upon the manner they relate with Abraham or his descendants (Gn. 12:3). This verse may be understood as a divine reciprocal promise: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." It appears from this text that other nations are inseparably tied to Abraham through this divine reciprocal blessing. God is the one doing the blessing but He does it in the context of the manner other nations relate with Abraham. From this affinity of foreigners to Abraham and his descendants¹², the need emerges for us to explore how this relationship was subsequently understood and applied in the early post-exilic period according to Ezra and Nehemiah.

¹² There are similar allusions to this sweeping promise of blessing Abraham, his descendants and other nations in other passages such as Psalm 72:17; 87: 4-7; Is 19: 23-25). It can therefore be argued that since there are several references concerning the relation of foreigners to Abraham and his descendants in the Old Testament, it undoubtedly underscore the validity of taking the issue of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews seriously. It also underscores the need to explore how this relationship was subsequently understood and applied in the early post-exilic period.

A word of caution must be made here that this selected research field is not going to provide exhaustive solutions to the concerns that have been identified above. In any case, the problems have been raised because they are important and should not be obscured when examining the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Further study is encouraged where current effort is limited.

1.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This study has several aims and objectives.

First, the aim and objective is to find whether foreigners or non-Jews were allowed to relate with the early post-exilic Jewish community in their religious life and communal living according to Ezra and Nehemiah.

Second, the researcher intends to discern the nature of the relationship between the Jews who had returned from exile and other people who had remained in or around Judah.

Third, the research aims at discovering the basis on which the relationship between foreigners and the post-exilic Jews was sustained. Could the Abrahamic covenant promises ¹³ serve as this basis? In other words, do the Abrahamic covenant and other pre-exilic Old Testament texts provide a

¹³ Gn 12: 3: *“And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (The quotation is taken from the New American Standard Bible 1977 from Computer Bible Works). Cf. Gn 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

framework for a subsequent religious and communal relationship between foreigners and Israelites or Jews?

Fourth, if such above supposed religious and communal affinity between foreigners and the Israelites was provided in the Abrahamic covenant and in other pre-exilic Old Testament texts, how did Ezra and Nehemiah understand and apply this framework during their religious and social reforms in the early post-exilic period?

Fifth, the study wants to examine the text of Ezra-Nehemiah and see whether Ezra and Nehemiah exhibits racial prejudice or at least exclusivity in their dealing with non-Jews as supposed by others (cf Williamson 1987:83).

1.5 HYPOTHESIS

This research has a dual hypothesis. *The first facet is that the study demonstrates that the Abrahamic covenant¹⁴ and certain passages from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history provide a framework for a religious and communal relationship between the Israelites and or Jews and foreigners (other nations).*

¹⁴ Abrahamic covenant promises that relate to foreigners include: Gn 12:3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27; 18:18-19; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

A second facet is that this investigation shows that the author(s) or editor(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah re-interpreted certain passages from the Pentateuch in a peculiar way to support the exclusive religious and social reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah

1.6 METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This research has utilized a multifaceted method and design. The literary and historical methods have been used with a theological perspective (cf Gorman 2001:8). The researcher's conviction is that the text of the Bible is a literary, historical and theological document (McKenzie & Haynes 1999:20-21). What this means is that the biblical text has a record of events that have happened in history. This history is theological (Enns 2000:23-25). In other words, Biblical writers used literary devices to write the theological history. They wrote the history with a theological purpose, motive or goal (cf Warfield 1927:429; Merrill 1994:48; Miller 1999:20-21).

This inquiry has taken each of these three components: literary, historical and theological aspects, seriously. This kind of approach is closely related to what Longman III (1997:113) said,

“it is not only possible, it is necessary to integrate literary analysis with the study of history and the text's ideology (theology). They are all aspects of the text's act of communication...Literary analysis can distort our understanding of the message of the bible if practiced alone.”

In view of the above, the literary account of the theological history of the early post-exilic Jewish community in relation to foreigners recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah is examined. The study took the literature of Ezra and Nehemiah as its primary sources of information. It has examined the specific passages¹⁵ that deal with the issue of foreigners or non-Jews in Ezra, Nehemiah and some other related biblical texts. The investigation also include secondary literature that deal with the Jews and non-Jews in the Persian period. This research also examined a few passages in the book of Genesis in order to conceptualize what the Abrahamic covenant says about foreigners or other nations in relation to the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Summarily, this investigation has utilized the synchronic method¹⁶ deliberately more than the diachronic¹⁷ one for several reasons. First, the scope or limits of this study does not warrant an exhaustive exegetical method.

¹⁵ Ezr 1:1-2. Cf. Is 44:28- 45:1; Jr 25:11-14; 29:10-14; Ezr 2:59-63. Nm 1:18-19; Ezr 3:7 Cf. 1 Ki 5:6-12; Ezr 4:1-24 Cf. 2 Ki 17:24-41; Neh 6: 16; Ezr 5:3-17; Neh 2:10, 19; 4:1-3, 7-8, 11, 15; 6:1-9, 12-14; 6:17-19; Ezr 6:1-15; 6:21-22; 7:11-26; Neh 2:1, 6, 8; 8:36. 2 Ki 17:24-41 Ezr 4:1-5; Neh 1:2, 3; Ezr 9:1-2; 10:18, 44; 9:3-15; 10:1; 10:2-44; Neh 10:28- 39; 13:23- 28; Ezr 9:2. Cf. Is 6:13; Neh 9:2; 13:30; 12:30; 13:1- 9; 13:15-22.

¹⁶ Gorman (2001:12) defined synchronic method as that form of biblical exegesis that “looks only at the final form of the text, the text as it stands in the Bible as we have it.” Similarly, Wenham (1987:xxxiv) argues that “the new literary critic [synchronic critic] wants to understand how the final editor viewed his material and why he arranged it in the way he did” (cf Dillard & Longman III 1994:96-97).

¹⁷ Gorman (2001:15) defined diachronic method as that form of exegesis that “focuses on the origin and development of a text....this approach is often referred to as the *historical-critical method*.” Cf. Wenham 1987:xxxiv.

Second, I believe that my major task in this inquiry is not to show how the various parts of the books, namely Ezra, Nehemiah and Genesis came into being,¹⁸ rather, the task here concerns the Masoretic text of Ezra-Nehemiah¹⁹ (cf Enns 2000:20-21), and what the Hebrew text says about the relationship between the Jews and non-Jews in the early post-exilic period. It is self-evident that much can be learned from knowing how particular texts of the Bible came into being. In dealing specifically with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the researcher has utilized information derived from a synchronic method and less from the diachronic approach.

Third, there are however, several diachronic arguments²⁰ concerning the historicity, reliability and sources of individual books of the Hebrew Scripture. Similar arguments (eg Breneman 1993:3543; Williamson 1985:xxiii-xxxv) have been propounded on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.²¹ There is no question that such arguments are valid in their own right. It is important for a Biblical exegete to be familiar with matters that lie behind a given text namely sources, time sequence, original audience, authorial intention et cetera.

¹⁸ Though diachronic method also is a valuable exegetical way of arriving at the meaning of a text; and I have employed it at some points (eg composition and chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah) in this research, however, I have used the method sparingly in the overall thesis.

¹⁹ BHS- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.

²⁰ See Dillard and Longman III (1994: 38-48); Viviano (1999:57); Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone (2001:20-34).

²¹ See also chapter two of this thesis from the selected research fields on central issues that have concerned scholars in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Despite the validity of the diachronic approach, it has not provided a non-questionable, coherent answer to the concerns that the text of the Hebrew Scripture has posed for its readers. In addition, arguments concerning sources (eg Genesis) are “always bound to be hypothetical, whereas the final form of the text is a reality” (Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone 2001:49). This investigation will therefore limit its scope particularly, to the text of Ezra, Nehemiah and hopefully parts of Genesis. The narratives in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah as well as other passages in the Bible, are taken in a literal sense. The accounts or narratives in each of the books (i.e. Genesis, Ezra and Nehemiah) are taken as a literary unit in their own right. The researcher is aware of the difficulty of such a method but has consciously opted to do so in order to limit the scope of this work. As such, this method of investigation is open to constructive criticism where appropriate.

1.7 CHAPTER DIVISION, ORTHOGRAPHY AND DESCRIPTION OF TERMS

There are three aspects in this section. The first feature provides introductory information on each of the chapters. The second part is a brief explanation to orthographical matters used in this inquiry. Meanwhile, the last aspect deals with the description of certain terms used in this research.

1.7.1 Chapter division

Chapter one deals with introductory subjects. These include the relevance of the study, need for the research, aims and objectives, research hypothesis, methodology, chapter divisions, orthographical information and description of certain terms used in the work.

Chapter two examines selected research fields on Ezra and Nehemiah. The issue of unity between Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles is discussed. Other matters investigated are composition, chronology and unity between Ezra and Nehemiah, date, authorship, theology and the relationship between Jews and foreigners in the early post-exilic period as well as certain related matters.

Chapter three investigates the context and nature of the Abrahamic covenant as well as the meaning of the covenant promise(s) to Abraham (Gn 12: 3b; 18:18; 22:18), Isaac (Gn 26:4) and Jacob (Gn 28:14). The relationship between the Abrahamic/the Mosaic covenants and the events in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning foreigners is explored.

Chapter four discusses two perspectives on foreigners in the Pentateuch, Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History and in Ezra and Nehemiah. The investigation reveals that there are two perspectives concerning foreigners which include exclusive and inclusive perspectives.

Finally, Chapter five synthesizes the content of the whole investigation. It also includes some remarks on some of the issues that have been raised from the research.

1.7.2 Orthography

This study uses the Harvard reference system²² (author-date reference system) and the research 'guidelines for students' (compiled by Kritzinger 2001) suggested by the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. The author, date of publication and page number(s) are used in brackets to indicate the source of an idea which is not original to the researcher. The detail references are provided in the bibliography following the last chapter.

Other materials used in the research are The New American Standard Bible 1977 (NAS, for all the English Bible quotations), BHS- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (4th ed. for Hebrews words, phrases and quotations) and LXX- Septuagint Rahlfs' (Greek Translation of the Old Testament).²³ The Hebrew transliteration used in the study is derived from Kelley (1992:1).

²² Kilian, J 1989. *Form and style in theological texts: A guide for the use of the Harvard reference system*. 2nd rev ed. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

²³ All these three versions (NAS, BHS and LXX) of the Bible are extracted from Computer 'Bible Works' programme.

1.7.3 Description of Terms.

There are several terms that have been used in the content of this work to describe particular groups of people. For the sake of my research topic, the group who returned from Babylonian exile to Judah have been recognized as the supposed post-exilic Jewish community, while the people who remained in or around the land of Judah or Israel during the Babylonian exile are considered foreigners. Therefore, my dissertation should be understood as dealing with the relationship between the Jews or Israelites who had returned from the Babylonian exile to the land of Judah and the people who lived in and around Judah and Israel during and after the exile.

Israelites and Hebrews: These terms refer to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons who later became the twelve tribes of Israel as found in the Pentateuch. These terms are used when references are made to the stories or passages from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic history.

Jews: The term refers to those who are of Israelite descent in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The term is also used, to describe those of Israelite descent who had gone to exile or those of Israelite descent who had remained in the land of Israel or Judah during the Babylonian exile.

Post-exilic Jews or Jewish community: This group refers particularly to those of Israelite descents who were taken to Babylonian and later returned to the land of Judah. Other terms that are used to describe the same group of people include: the *Golah* community, the returned exiles, returning exiles, returning Jews and the post-exilic Israelites. The reader of Ezra and Nehemiah may find out that the religious and social reforms in the post-exilic period had attempted to separate this group from the people who were living in and around the land of Judah and Israel during and after the Babylonian exile. In other words, the returning exiles appeared to be considered by the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah as the only legitimate descendants of the pre-exilic Israel. This distinction is so pervasive in Ezra and Nehemiah that the Jews or Israelites who had remained in the land of Judah or Israel during the Babylonian exile, sometimes, were been treated as non-Israelites, non-Jews or even as foreigners.

Foreigners, Aliens and Sojourners: These terms are used interchangeably to describe those who are not Israelites by descent: Those who did not biologically descend from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve tribes of Israel. In the book of Ezra and Nehemiah, other terms are used to describe such groups, namely, people of the land, the surrounding people or nations and neighbours of the returning exiles. Other groups that came under this classification also include: Canaanite tribes, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites,

Egyptians, and certain tribes around the Trans-Euphrates. In some cases, the editor(s) or author(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah consider the Jews or Israelites who had not gone to exile as outsiders.