

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The question “Who are Yahweh’s people?” can hardly be answered easily today because it might spark a whole range of responses or viewpoints from Jews and Christians alike (cf Goldingay 2003:224-226). This complexity may stem from the fact that what each religious group believes about the accounts from the Old and the New Testaments concerning the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ may differ from each other to a certain extent. This same question, I suppose, appeared to have sparked similar varied responses during the early post-exilic period in Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, if a religious Jew today, for instance, is confronted with the question “Who are Yahweh’s people?” he or she may likely say that the Israelites or Jews are Yahweh’s people. However, if someone poses a similar question to a Christian today, the Christian may likely say that all Christian believers are Yahweh’s people. Some other Christians may even argue further that since everyone is supposedly created by Yahweh, he is the God

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<sup>2</sup> For example, it appears from Ezr 2:59-63 and Neh 7:61-65 that some people supposedly understood themselves as ‘Yahweh’s people’; despite their self-understanding, they were excluded from priestly functions and from participating in the sacred assemblies of the returning exiles because there was a suspicion on their biological or genealogical background. In this incident, it seems obvious that the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ appeared to have been understood by certain returning exiles, restrictively to the true biological, or untainted proven descendants of Israel. Implicitly, no one outside this categorization could be recognised as ‘Yahweh’s people’ according to the exclusive theological perspective of some of the newly returned exiles (cf Van Wyk & Breytenbach 2001:1256; Smith 1996:555-556; see also Ezr 4:1-3; 9:1-2; Neh 2:19-20; 9:1-2; 13:1-9, 23-28).

of all human beings; therefore, all human beings are 'Yahweh's people' by virtue of creation (cf Ps 24:1-2; Jb 41:11).

The basis on which the above mentioned religious groups could sustain their beliefs on the concept of 'Yahweh's people' may appear to be more or less the same. On the one hand, the Hebrew Bible, which is considered by the Christian Church as the Old Testament, could be the basis on which a religious Jew may sustain his/her belief on the concept of 'Yahweh's people'. On the other hand, in addition to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the New Testament could be added to form the basis on which a Christian believer may sustain his/her viewpoint on the same concept.

Therefore, one may be tempted to argue that the cause of the variation between the two religious viewpoints concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people' could be traced to the dissimilarity in the source material. This would mean the problem stems from the factor that the religious Jew bases his/her conviction on the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) while the religious Christian bases his/her viewpoint on the Christian Bible (which includes both the Old and the New Testaments). Consequently, if the source material of each religious group could be understood as the main factor for the difference of opinions concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people', our effort to harmonize the two religious viewpoints might be counter productive. This reconciliatory effort could end in a deadlock because neither of the religious groups would

probably be willing to relinquish their authoritative source material for another concerning their respective religious convictions.

Therefore, my premise is that the cause of the difference stems not so much from the source material itself. Rather, the interpretation of the source material seems to be the major factor behind the differences in each viewpoint concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people'. It seems that the concept of 'Yahweh's people' is understood by both religious groups in a sense that does not fully represent what the Old Testament portrays in its literary account. Similarly, it appears to me that the tension which a person immediately encounters in Ezra and Nehemiah on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' stems from misunderstanding the dual perspectives of the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants by the author(s)/editor(s).

Hence, the premise to be investigated is that the concept of 'Yahweh's people', in my judgment, included the covenant believing Israelites and non-Israelites according to the inclusive theological perspective of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. In other words, both covenants give the impression that 'Yahweh's people', theologically, included not only the Israelites but also other covenant-believing human beings who might originate from different social, political, racial, national or geographical backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One can easily notice from this argument that the idea of covenant appears to be one of the central themes that lay behind the concept of 'Yahweh's people'. Another way of stating my argument is that a perspective of the two covenants reveals that whoever believes in and accepts Yahweh's covenant provisions (with Israel) becomes a member of the 'people of Yahweh'. Racial, national, tribal, or linguistic differences seemed to be less significant qualities that could have determined inclusion or exclusion from the covenant membership. Rather, the acceptance or the rejection of the covenant provisions determined a person's inclusion or exclusion from the

Pointedly, according to the testimony of certain passages from the book of Genesis<sup>4</sup>, Yahweh, the God of Israel, appeared to have shown appropriate covenant means through which he could embrace people from Israel and also those from other racial, ethnic, linguistic, national and or geographical backgrounds as his own. However, the viewpoint that seemed to dominate the stories in Ezra and Nehemiah appears to portray the contrary.<sup>5</sup>

Traces of the integration of other races into the community of Israel are difficult, particularly in the perspective of Nehemiah 9. However, “the Holiness Source and the Deuteronomistic texts did find ways to integrate the resident outsider of foreign origin into the body of Israel” (Becking 2003:27).

Therefore, the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ according to an inclusive theological perspective of the Pentateuch includes every covenant believing human being from Israel and from every other part of the world (cf Goldingay 2003:224-226). This viewpoint may form a major part of the focus of this investigation. The study will describe an inclusive theological viewpoint of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants on the conception of ‘Yahweh’s people’ and ‘other nations’ or ‘foreigners’. This consideration could provide a beam of light to understanding the apparent tension in Ezra and Nehemiah during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC).

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covenant community or from becoming ‘Yahweh’s people’. This perspective is discussed in chapters three and four.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Gn 12:3; 17:4-16, 19; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18; 26: 2-5; 28:13-15 et cetera.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Ezr 2:59-63; 4:1-3; 9:1-5; Neh 2:20; 10:28-39; 13:1-9, 15-29.

## 1. 2 MOTIVATION

One of the first questions that normally comes to the mind of a reader in a study like this is: what has motivated the researcher to do an investigation on such a topic? My response to such a question is that there are a number of factors that have motivated me to do research on the concept of 'Yahweh's people.' The situation in my family as well as my religious and educational experiences, in one way or the other, have inspired me to write on the concept of 'Yahweh's people'. My interest to study the Bible academically and to contribute to the global theological discourse also forms part of this motivation.

I have come from an economically and educationally disadvantaged family. The underprivileged conditions of my family could have impeded my educational and economic progress. But the most decisive factor that has made a great impact on my life is the acceptance of Jesus Christ as my Saviour. The gospel of Jesus Christ was communicated to me when I was still a young person through my parents, guardians and church leaders. This gospel message was brought to our region by the united missionary activities of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa and the Christian Reformed Church of North America (DRCM/CRC) on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1911 (cf Usue 2001:7-9). Through a concerted missionary work of the two denominations, the gospel of Jesus Christ was received in many villages and communities within Tiv land (Nigeria). I learned from the Bible that God loves me and has died for my sins. I also learned that because of his love, I need to love others. I was

also, taught that all human beings have been made in God's image, irrespective of racial, ethnic, social, religious, economic or educational differences. Therefore, I was motivated to love every other person irrespective of their racial, economic, educational or religious differences et cetera.

Thus, that kind of background teaching gave me a sense of worth as a human being, as well as the impetus to show compassion to every other person, irrespective of their colour, race, language, ethnicity, nationality, religious, social/economic status. Through my interaction with certain Christian friends, I experienced God's kindness, care and support in various ways. I was supported in my educational training from primary to tertiary institutions. I could not have obtained a higher level of education, if it had depended entirely on my poor parents to pay for the cost. Those who provided for my educational expenses came from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. Yet, all of them were drawn together to support me because of their common sense of God's love for them and the desire to share that love unconditionally.

I experienced a similar kindness when I moved and studied in the United States of America. During my studies in the United States as from 1997 to 2002 (in Louisville and subsequently in Philadelphia), I was supported by a number of American Christian friends and a Church. Most of these friends were from other races. Yet, their desire to show God's love and kindness to others had motivated all of them to support me financially, materially,

prayerfully and otherwise. I obtained two post-graduate academic degrees from the United States through this godly loving support. As a result, my educational and religious background experiences gave me a loving heart for other people and a great respect for human life in general.

But there is also a negative part to my experiences which have contributed to my motivation to do research on this topic. I have observed and also experienced a certain form of injustice, discrimination, humiliation and mistrust or mistreatment et cetera in my family, church/denomination, ethnic tribe, my country Nigeria and in the United States of America.

Several members of my family seem to profess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. But there are conflicts, violence and jealousy et cetera among the family members in the last one and a half decades. These conflicts have caused a major rift between family members. Their sense of God's love for one another has suddenly disappeared.

Evidences of conflicts, jealousy, injustices and deprivation of others appear to be swelling up in my denomination and ethnic tribe. The issue of land ownership and other economic, religious and political factors have severed church members from one another. Since many Tiv people are farmers, the issue of land ownership has become increasingly contentious among them. The Tiv and other neighbouring tribes also have engaged in vicious land disputes. The contention invariably involves Christian church members.

As a result, hundreds, if not thousands of lives and property have been lost on both sides of the conflict<sup>6</sup>. Regrettably, some church members have participated in the conflict and even aggravated it. Instead of being part of the solution, they are part of the problem. For example, there has been land violence between Kusuv and Ikurav, Ipav and Ukan, Gaav and Ukan, Tsambe and Mbangugh, Nyiev and Nanev in the last one and a half decades. These groups are segments within the Tiv ethnic tribe. Apparently, the Christian church in Tiv land, in my judgement, has not demonstrated a strong resolve to find ways of reducing these conflicts nor have the Christians taken precautionary measures to try to keep them from happening. The Christian sense of God's love and kindness toward one another has been lost or at least neglected in these circumstances.

The denial to give my wife a USA Visa to join me during the course of my studies was another factor that motivated the choice of this topic. My wife and I provided the required documentation to the USA consulate in Nigeria for the Visa. She was however, denied the Visa. As an added effort to prove our case, the Missionary representative from the Christian Reformed Church of North America in my Church explained to the USA consulate that my wife and I would complete our studies and return home to teach at the Reformed Theological Seminary at Mkar. But the consulate was not convinced. So, I

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<sup>6</sup>See <http://www.vanguardngr.com/news/articles/2001/November/16112001/f4161101.htm>;  
"Focus On Central Region Tiv, Jukun Clashes" in UN Integrated Regional Information Networks  
October 24, 2001: <http://www.allAfrica.com/publishers>



lived in the USA for five years while my wife was at home in Nigeria. This was an unpleasant experience for our marriage. This factor later motivated me to transfer from the USA to South Africa where both of us could stay together while I completed my theological training.

I suppose that our experience would have been different if we were USA citizens seeking a visa to study elsewhere in the world. It would have probably been much easier for both of us to be granted the visa based on where we had come from rather than on the merits of our case. The impression I received from the USA consulate was that we were denied our basic human right to live together as a couple because of the presumption that we may be tempted to remain in the USA and not return home. This presumption was simply not true in our case. Secondly, it seemed to me that the facts we had presented to the USA consulate were mistrusted based on where we had come from, not on the basis of the reliability of the facts themselves. I think that every human being needs to be viewed with dignity and respect. Each person is made in God's image. Therefore, each person deserves to be treated with trust, respect, love and dignity. It seems to me that several of the ills and conflicts in the world today and the pain that people go through in some places could be reduced if this approach is adopted.

I am also interested in contributing to the global theological discourse on the Bible. My conviction is that the Bible is both a spiritual and an academic resource that could shape or transform my knowledge and conscience and

hopefully that of others who are involved in a similar task. This knowledge, I believe, could enhance the growth and unity of the Christian Church in Africa and in the world at large if it is appropriated properly.

Therefore, the various experiences from my family, church, tribe and from the USA have contributed partly to my motivation for this investigation. My positive experiences from my Christian upbringing have enabled me to possess a positive posture toward others and the willingness to show love, compassion and support to them, irrespective of their racial, economic, social, ethnic or religious differences.

The conflicts and some of the inhumane treatment which I have witnessed in my family, church, ethnic tribe, and country, in the last one and a half decades have disturbed me. These are at odds with my religious conviction, upbringing and experience. These have prompted me to question the religious conviction of other individual Christians who participate in and facilitate the continuance of such conflicts. How could the so-called Christian church members take weapons and kill each other on the basis of their sectional, ethnic, racial, religious and or other perceived differences?

Reading the stories of the Bible over again, I came across similar stories of conflicts, especially those that related to Israel and their neighbours (cf Josh, 1 & 2 Sm, 1 & 2 Ki and 1 & 2 Chr). I could not justify the motives behind such conflicts. Though, it looks to me that Yahweh, the God of Israel had allowed some of the conflicts to occur as part of his judgement against other pagan

nations who had failed to acknowledge him, as their God. This viewpoint cannot be used to justify all the wars that have been reported in the Bible. Certainly, I do not subscribe to the notion of having to fight war in order to pave way for peace between two parties. My viewpoint is that there is always a way, for resolving political, economic, social or religious problems without necessarily shedding blood. If both parties are truly determined to seek peace, they will find it without a blood bath.

The premise or basis on which other conflicts are founded also might be disturbing; for example, the basis on which the contestation between the returned exiles and the rest of the other people in and around Judah was founded in Ezra and Nehemiah appears to be a single sided understanding of the Old Testament viewpoint. I have the impression from Ezra and Nehemiah that other peoples of the land (*am ha'arets*) pledged allegiance to Yahweh, the God of Israel, but their pledge was ignored or rejected by the returned exiles (cf Ezr 4:1-3). Consequently, these returned exiles considered themselves exclusively as 'Yahweh's people'. As a result, they undertook a thorough religious and social reform. This led to the exclusion of many other people living in and around Judah from the religious, cultural and social gatherings of the returned exiles.

Strangely, the returned exiles appealed to the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants as their basis for carrying out such sweeping reforms. However, a close reading of the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants concerning the

relationship between Israel and other people portrays the contrary. There is more than one perspective in the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants on 'Yahweh's people' (Israel) and other nations.

On the one hand, one may find an exclusive perspective on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations in both covenants as well as in the Old Testament in general. On the other hand, one may also find an inclusive perspective concerning 'Yahweh's people' (Israel) and other nations in the same covenants. In certain instances, the former perspective is emphasized above the latter. But one can find substantial Old Testament passages that support each of the two theological perspectives.

Therefore, it is left for an individual to decide upon a particular viewpoint and build a case on it. A reasonable discussion has already been done in support of the exclusive theological perspective concerning Israel's relationship with other peoples. My present effort will therefore, explore the inclusive perspective on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations. The Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants will be examined in this respect. The conception of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations, aliens, and foreigners as portrayed in the two covenants will be described.

My major concern in this section should not be obscured. I have attempted to describe some of the factors that have contributed to my motivation to do an investigation on the concept of 'Yahweh's people' during the early post-exilic period in Ezra and Nehemiah. I have explained that my positive and negative

experiences from my family, church, ethnic tribe, country and from the United States of America have contributed to my motivation to do this study. I am also interested in making academic contribution to the theological discourse on the Bible in Africa and around the globe.

Consequently, the basis for the contestation between the returned exiles and the rest of the people living in and around Judah during and after the exile is at odds with my experience and in conflict with my understanding of the Abrahamic and of the Mosaic covenant perspectives on 'Yahweh's people' and other nations, foreigners and aliens. As a result, I have the motivation to investigate the conflict in Ezra and Nehemiah as well as the basis for it.

### **1. 3 RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study will contribute its findings to the existing literature on Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the two theological perspectives on the concept of 'Yahweh's people' during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC).

The inquiry will show that in my perspective, certain passages from the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants appeared to have provided a covenantal framework through which many people from Israel and from other nations might be understood as 'Yahweh's people'. This covenant framework, if understood appropriately, could reduce the unhealthy Christian religious and communal division that might exist today between different groups of people, races, tribes, languages and nations, et cetera. An example, the violence in Tiv land which has affected many people could be reduced. I

believe that a peace could be achieved through appropriate dialogue, among the Christian religious groups. They could understand that they are 'Yahweh's people' and therefore, one family, irrespective of their other presumed differences. This knowledge could lead to a renewed religious unity.

Finally, the investigation will reveal how, in my opinion, the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah re-interpreted certain texts from the Pentateuch and from the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history to support the exclusive religious and social reforms during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC). This knowledge might enable religious Christians and Jews alike to avoid similar re-interpretation and application of certain related or comparable biblical texts to support a current conflict situation.

#### **1. 4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Much work has been done by scholars on several issues in Ezra and Nehemiah during the last twenty years<sup>7</sup>. Through a brief study of this literature, it seems that little discussion has been done on the two theological perspectives in Ezra and Nehemiah on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations, foreigners and aliens during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC). In other words, the concept of 'Yahweh's people' during the early post-exilic period in Ezra and Nehemiah appears to be one of the central theological trajectories that lay behind the conflicts in the books and

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<sup>7</sup> For example, 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); Farisani (2004); Pakkala (2004) and Wright (2004) et cetera.

should have deserved much more attention among scholars.<sup>8</sup> The reasons being as follows:

- Tension in Ezra and Nehemiah

First, it may be observed that there appears to be a contestation between those who are perceived as foreigners<sup>9</sup> (i.e. non-exiles, non-Israelites or non-Jews) and those who had returned from the Babylonian exile on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' (cf Ezr 2:59-63; 4:1-3; 9:1-5; Neh 2:20; 10:28-39; 13:1-9, 15-29). This tension clearly reveals that certain returned exiles understood themselves exclusively as 'Yahweh's people'. On the contrary, some non-exiles also perceived themselves as 'Yahweh's people'. Consequently, these two opposing theological perspectives have contested against each other on the concept of 'Yahweh's people' throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf Boccaccini 2002:82-83).

The above tension also seems to be 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. Grabbe (2000a:299; cf Allen 2003: 5-6) also asserts that "the main theme in Ezra is this conflict between those living in the land

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<sup>8</sup> Albertz & Becking (2003:xiii) shared a similar perspective when they argued that "religion played an important role in the emergence and the final identity of the Yahwistic community in Yehud" during the Persian period.

<sup>9</sup> It appears from Ezr 2:59-62; 4:1-3; 9:1-2; Neh 2:19-20; 7:61-65; 9:1-2; 13:1-9, 23-28 that several groups of people were considered as foreigners based on the suspicion held by some of the returning exiles that such people were biologically, geographically, or religiously different from them. On account of this suspicion, non-exiles were seen as outsiders rather than members of the Israelite community. In other words, since they were suspected to have come from elsewhere rather than from the exile community, they were excluded from certain religious and communal assemblies (cf Van Wyk & Breytenbach 2001:1256).

and those returning from exile, whether hindering the building of the temple or creating problems by intermarriage.” Therefore, if the passages<sup>10</sup> that deal with the contestation between the returned exiles (the so-called ‘Yahweh’s people’) and the non-exiles (or the alleged ‘non-Yahweh’s people’) are removed from these books, the narratives in the books may become so fragmented that no one would be able to make any sense out of them.

- Contribution of foreigners to the restoration of the Judean exiles

Second, it is self-evident from the two books that without the participation of certain alleged foreigners, such as king Cyrus<sup>11</sup>, Artaxerxes, Darius, et cetera in initiating the return of the post-exilic Jewish community, and in the 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 the active participation of the so-called foreigners or ‘non-Yahweh’s people’ in the restoration of the post-exilic Jewish community was of invaluable benefit, not just for the restored community, but also for the non-exiles or non-Jews as well. If such was the case, what was that benefit? To put it theologically, what kind of religious benefit would the alleged foreigners have achieved, given the fact that they had worked so much for the restoration of these returning Jewish exiles, the rebuilding of the altar, the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem?

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<sup>10</sup> Cf 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.

<sup>11</sup> Strikingly, the role of Cyrus is compared to that of a Davidic king in Roberts (2002:376-377).



- Inconsistent attitude of the returned exiles

Third, the seemingly inconsistent attitudes of the early post-exilic Jewish community also caused a concern for the need to explore the theological perspectives in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people' during this period. On the one hand, the command to re-build the temple, erect an altar for Yahweh and re-build the city walls of Jerusalem was initiated and supported by the foreign kings (cf Ezr 1:1-2; 6:1-15, 21; 7:11-26; Neh 2:6-9). In addition, other foreigners also appeared to have assisted, by providing some building materials for the above projects (Ezr 3:7; cf 1 Ki 5:6-12). During all of the above mentioned instances, the returned exiles did not apply their exclusivistic logic to resist the efforts of some of these foreigners in helping them on the projects.

On the other hand, it appears that the early post-exilic Jews rejected attempts of some of their neighbours from participating in the reconstruction of those same projects during the same period on the logic that their religious commitment to Yahweh and their racial as well as geographical backgrounds were questionable (cf Ezr 2:59-63; 4:1-3; 9:1-2; Neh 9:1-5; 10:28-39; 13:1-9, 15-29). Why were there such contradictions of attitudes among the early post-exilic Jewish community? On what grounds did the community welcome certain presumed foreigners or 'non-Yahweh's people' to assist in the restoration process and refuse others from similar access?

- Permissive attitude to foreigners in the pre-exilic period

Fourth, it may also be argued that other passages from the Old Testament seem to suggest that there was less tension between the Jews and non-Jews on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' prior to the period of Ezra and Nehemiah. For example, there appeared to have been a relatively permissive attitude for the integration of foreigners in the Israelite religious and social life prior to the early post-exilic period (cf Becking 2003:27). Earlier, Moses is reported to have married a non-Israelite woman (cf Ex 2:21-22; Nm 12:1-3). Moses' father in-law Jethro, the Midianite, was also reported to have offered sacrifices to Yahweh and gave Moses some helpful instructions for his administration (cf Ex 18:9-26).

Other foreigners also were said to have been accepted and absorbed in the Jewish/Israelite community prior to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (e.g. Rahab, Bathsheba, and Ruth etc). A similar openness was 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 (the redemptive memorial event) in Jerusalem and to contribute to the work of repairing the temple.

Comparatively, Cogan (1988:291) argued that "the Chronicler and his audience were prepared to assimilate non-Israelites into the community of the worshippers of the God of Israel." According to him, this sort of openness

must have precipitated the tension between the Chronicler and his audience, versus Ezra and Nehemiah and their audiences. This seeming openness to certain alleged foreigners on the one hand and exclusiveness to some of them on the other hand also calls for the need to explore the concept of 'Yahweh's people' during the early post-exilic period from a theological standpoint of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

- Testimony of the book of Jonah

Fifth, I would like to put the concept of 'Yahweh's people' in light of a larger Old Testament context. The book of Jonah appeared to exemplify the struggle for the people of Israel to comprehend the relationship between Yahweh and other nations or the alleged foreigners (cf Dillard and Longman 1994:394-395). Some of the theological questions in the book of Jonah that might contribute to an understanding of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are:

- Does God care about foreigners or non-Israelites (such as the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh<sup>12</sup>) as much as he does about the Jews or Israelites (cf Grabbe 2000a:18)?
- Could foreigners be forgiven of their sins and be embraced by Yahweh?
- Should Yahweh's message be preached to foreign nations to persuade them to come to repentance?

Of course, it appears from the accounts in the Pentateuch that Yahweh also desires to relate and to bless the so-called foreigners through appropriate

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<sup>12</sup> Jnh 1-4:11...“Should I not be concerned about that great city?” Cf Knierim (1995:320) who argued that “Yahweh is universally merciful God, not only for Israel but also for Niniveh”.

covenant provisions he had made with Abraham and his descendants.<sup>13</sup> Yahweh reaffirmed his covenant commitment with Abraham (Gn 17:4-21; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18), Isaac (Gn 26:2-5), and Jacob (Gn 28:13-15) to underscore the seriousness of the covenant promises.

In view of the above, it is apparent that the designation of Abraham and his descendants as the channel through which other nations might receive Yahweh's blessing, implicitly suggests *two things* (cf Gn 12:3; 17:4-16, 19; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18; 26: 2-5; 28:13-15):

- First, that Yahweh is concerned about other nations just as he cares about Israel.
- Second, that the blessings of other nations or foreigners hinged on how the other nations related to Abraham or his descendants.

This latter implication may be understood as the divine reciprocal promise: "I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse" (Gn 12:3). The statement also suggests that other nations are inseparably tied to Abraham through the divine reciprocal covenant blessing. Yahweh provides the covenant blessing. He does it via Abraham. Now, how could Yahweh bless other nations if these nations are forced to completely disassociate themselves from Abraham and his descendants? This affinity of Yahweh to foreigners through Abraham and his descendants<sup>14</sup>, calls for the need to

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<sup>13</sup>Cf Gn 12:3; 17:4-16, 19; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18; 26: 2-5; 28:13-15.

<sup>14</sup> There are similar allusions to this sweeping promise of blessing Abraham, his descendants and other nations in other passages apart from those that have been cited from Gn such as Ps 72:17; 87: 4-7; Is 19: 23-25.

explore the theological perspectives in Ezra and Nehemiah on the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and on the covenantal role of Israel to other nations during the early post-exilic period.

## **1. 5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

There are several aims and objectives to this investigation.

First, the research aims at showing that certain passages from the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants, according to my viewpoint, provide a covenantal framework through which the concept of 'Yahweh's people' might be understood and applied to the covenant believing members of Israel and to other people who might originate from different races, nations, tribes and languages, who embrace Yahweh as their God through this appropriate covenant means.

Second, the inquiry will investigate and describe the theological perspective(s) in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and concerning other nations, foreigners and aliens during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC). The choice of this date is informed by the fact that the events that are reported in Ezra and Nehemiah are assumed to have occurred during this early post-exilic period (see chapter 2.2 for the discussion on the date of Ezra and Nehemiah).

Third, the study shall clarify what seemed to be the basis on which certain people (for example, the returning exiles) were perceived as 'Yahweh's

people' while others (for example, non-exiles) were perceived differently in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Fourth, this inquiry plans to reveal that the author(s)/editor(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah appeared to have re-interpreted certain passages from the Pentateuch and from the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history in a peculiar way to support the exclusive religious and social reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah during the early post-exilic period (cf Becking 2003:27-29).

## 1. 6 HYPOTHESES

The research has employed two hypotheses:

- *First, the study demonstrates that Israel and virtually all other nations, languages, tribes and people could become 'Yahweh's people' through appropriate covenant means as evidenced from certain passages from the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants.<sup>15</sup>*
- *Second, this investigation shows that the author(s) or editor(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah re-interpreted certain passages from the Pentateuch and from deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history in a peculiar way to support the exclusive religious and social reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.*

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<sup>15</sup> Cf Gn12:3; 17: 5, 7-8, 10-14; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 38:6-30; Ex 12:17-20, 48-49; 20:8-11; 23:12; Lv 19:9-10; 22:17-20, 25; 23:22; 25:1-7; Nm 9:14; 12:1-2; 15:13-16, 29-30; 35:14-15; Dt 5:12-15; 14:28-29; 16:10-14; 23:10-11; 24:19-21; 26:12-15; Jos 6:22-23; Rt 1:16-17; 4:13-22; 2 Sm 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25.

## 1. 7 METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This research utilizes a multi-faceted method and design. Literary and historical methods are used with a theological perspective (cf Hasel 1991:194-208; Gorman 2001:8). My conviction is that the text of the Bible is a literary, historical and theological document (McKenzie & Haynes 1999:20-21). This means that the biblical text has a portrayal of certain events which it assumed to have happened in history. This biblical history is both literary and theological (cf Dillard & Longman III 1994:22; 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 Miller 1999:20-21; Merrill 1994:48; Warfield 1927:429).

As a consequence, this inquiry has taken each of these three components, literary, historical and theological aspects, seriously. This is an integrated approach which 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 doing so, I disagree with a perspective that do not take into account the historical aspect of the Bible on the basis of its theological component<sup>16</sup>. As a matter of fact,

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<sup>16</sup> According to Lang (2002:177), “historians do not believe in a divine act of revelation that establishes a religion; foundational revelations are considered the subject of popular etiologies, as mere imaginative answers to the question of what the origins were, as tales from the inexhaustible repertoire of pious storytellers. While these tales give invaluable insight into the religious mentality of the Hebrews, they are historically of little worth.” My viewpoint is that this

“No history of Israel can proceed without some consideration of that religion, for it was this alone that set Israel off from her environment and made her the distinctive and creative phenomenon that she was. Apart from it Israel’s history neither is explicable nor, one might add, would it be especially significant” (Bright 2000:144).

In view of the above, the literary account of the theological history of the early post-exilic Jewish community on the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ in Ezra and Nehemiah is examined. The study has taken the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah as its primary sources of information. Attention is given to the issues that reveal the tension between the newly returned Jewish exiles and the rest of the other people in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The investigation also includes secondary literature that deals with the same tension during the Persian period. In addition, this research examines a few passages from the Pentateuch as well as from the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history in order to conceptualize the nature of Yahweh’s relationship to other nations in the context of his covenant relationship with Israel. Therefore, the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants are singled out and considered in this regard.

In summary, this investigation utilizes both synchronic<sup>17</sup> and diachronic<sup>18</sup> methods where appropriate. Despite the fact that my major task in this inquiry

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kind of scepticism concerning the historical value of the biblical portrayal of history is defective. It is true that the biblical writers had theological/religious motives for what they wrote. However, their accounts cannot be completely dismissed as having any historical significance. The point I would like to stress is that the historical aspect of the biblical account should also be taken seriously until it can be proven otherwise (cf Smith 1990:xxviii). Historians should not bring in their preconceived negative judgment on the text of the Bible as employed by Lang.

<sup>17</sup> 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



appears to concern the description of the conception of 'Yahweh's people' as depicted in the Masoretic text of Ezra and Nehemiah and certain covenant texts (e.g. Gn 12:1-3; 15; 17 etc; cf Enns 2000:20-21), the task does not end there. In addition, certain texts which are considered in the study are understood better because of the integrated methods of investigation utilized here. Therefore, in order to conceptualize what Ezra and Nehemiah and other Old Testament texts say about the concept of 'Yahweh's people', I have employed both synchronic and diachronic methods in the investigation.

There are however, several diachronic arguments<sup>19</sup> concerning the historicity, reliability and sources of individual books of the Hebrew Scripture. Similar arguments (e.g. Breneman 1993:3543; Williamson 1985:xxiii-xxxv) had also been propounded on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>20</sup> 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 and authorial intention, et cetera.

Despite the validity of such diachronic arguments, my investigation has not exhausted every diachronic argument concerning the books of the Old Testament which this study has utilized. The investigation has been selective

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final editor viewed his material and why he arranged it in the way he did" (cf Dillard & Longman III 1994:96-97).

<sup>18</sup> Gorman (2001:15) also 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).

<sup>19</sup> See Dillard and Longman III (1994: 38-48); Viviano (1999:57) and Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone (2001:20-34).

<sup>20</sup>Cf chapter 2 of this study. It deals with Literature review on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

in its use and analysis of biblical texts employing both diachronic and synchronic methods of investigation as deemed necessary or appropriate.

It should also be borne in mind that arguments concerning sources, for example, ‘documentary hypothesis’ on the Pentateuch are “always bound to be hypothetical, whereas the final form of the text is a reality” (Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone 2001:49). Therefore, without ignoring the diachronic matters, this investigation used the final form of the text of Ezra, Nehemiah and hopefully the final form of certain passages from the Pentateuch and from the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history as its point of departure. In doing so, I concur with what Gorman (2001:23) had suggested [that] “all exegetes, whether beginners or professionals, deal directly with the final form of the text. It is this text that readers read, preachers preach, and hearers hear”. As such, my use of an integrated method of literary and historical investigation in a controlled manner is open to constructive criticism where appropriate.

## **1.8 CHAPTER DIVISION, ORTHOGRAPHY AND TERMINOLOGY**

There are three aspects in this section. The first feature is the chapter division which provides introductory information on each of the six chapters of this investigation. The second part provides a brief explanation to the orthographical matters used in this research. The last aspect deals with the description of certain terminologies utilized in the study.

### **1.8.1 Chapter division**

Chapter one deals with introductory subjects. These include introduction, motivation, relevance of the study, statement of the problem, aims and objectives, research hypothesis, methodology, chapter divisions, orthographical information and the description of certain terminologies used in the dissertation.

Chapter two is a literature review on selected matters from Ezra and Nehemiah. These include date and authorship, unity between Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles, composition, chronology and unity between Ezra and Nehemiah, Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, book of the law, ownership of the land of Judah, administrative status of the state of Judah, theology of Ezra and Nehemiah and factors behind the tension between the newly returned Jewish exiles and non-exiles during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC).

Chapter three examines the Ancient Near Eastern treaty pattern and the Abrahamic covenant formula. The Ancient Near Eastern region serves as a socio-political and cultural background to the Old Testament. Thus, the concept of covenant is examined at the backdrop of the Ancient Near Eastern treaty pattern.

Chapter four investigates the source of the name and cult of Yahweh as a background to the discussion on the inclusive theological perspective concerning the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and concerning other nations, foreigners and aliens in the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants.

Chapter five describes the inclusive and exclusive theological perspectives on the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ and other nations, foreigners and aliens in Ezra and Nehemiah during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC). The chapter shows how the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ underlies the contestation between the returned exiles and the people living in and around Judah during and after the exile in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

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

### **1.8.2 Orthography**

This study uses the adjusted Harvard reference system<sup>21</sup> (author-date reference system) and the research ‘guidelines for students’ (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. The detail references are provided in the bibliography following the table of Hebrew transliteration.

Other materials used in the research are The New American Standard Bible 1995 (NASB, for most of the English Bible quotations), BHS- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (4<sup>th</sup> ed. for Hebrews words, phrases and quotations) and LXX- Septuagint Rahlfs’ (Greek Translation of the Old Testament).<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> See Kilian (1989).

<sup>22</sup> All these three versions (NASB, BHS and LXX) of the Bible are extracted from the Computer ‘Bible Works’ Version 6.0 (CD Rom edition).

Hebrew transliteration in this study is a modified version of Futato (2003). I have used both a transliterated Hebrew and the Hebrew itself interchangeably in the content of this dissertation.

### 1.8.3 Terminology

There are several terms that have been used in the content of this work to describe particular groups of people. For the sake of this research topic, the groups who returned from Babylonian exile to Judah under the leadership of Sheshbazzar or Zerubbabel, Jeshua (cf Ezr 1:8, 11; 2:1--2), Ezra (cf Ezr 7:1-7) and Nehemiah (cf Neh 2:7-9) have been called variously as the post-exilic Jewish community, the *golah* community, the returned/returning exiles, the Jewish exiles or the new Israelite community. Meanwhile, the people who remained in or around the land of Judah or Israel during and after the Babylonian exile are supposedly referred to as foreigners, aliens, other nations or the people(s) of the land. Therefore, this investigation should be understood as dealing with the tension between the Jews or Israelites who had returned from the Babylonian exile to the land of Judah versus the people who lived in and around Judah and Israel during and after the exile. The underlying factor behind the conflict is the conception of 'Yahweh's people'.

- Israelites<sup>23</sup> and Hebrews

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<sup>23</sup> Becking (2003:19) argued that the term "Israel" is a vague concept during the Persian period because it is used to refer to many groups of people such as the "descendants of the indigenous population of the kingdom of Judah, returnees from the Babylonian Exile, Mesopotamians exiled by Assyrians Kings, Mesopotamians joining returnees from the Exile, proto-Samaritans, and the like." However, this thesis uses the term in a limited sense as explained before not in a similar sense with Becking's theory.

These terms have been used in the research to refer to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons who later became the twelve tribes of Israel as depicted in the Pentateuch and in the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic history. The terms are used when references are made to the stories or passages from the Pentateuch and from the deuteronomic and deuteronomistic history to distinguish them from other surrounding tribes.

- Jews

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

- Post-exilic Jews/Jewish community

This group refers particularly to those of Israelite descents who were taken to Babylon and later returned to the land of Judah between 538 and 400 BC. Other terms that are used to describe the same group of people include: the *golah* (הַלְלוֹאִים) community, the returned exiles, returning exiles, returning Jews, the holy seed/race and the post-exilic Israelites. The reader of Ezra and Nehemiah may find out that during the religious and social reforms in the early post-exilic period this group were encouraged to separate from the rest of the people who were living in and around the territories of Judah or Israel. In other words, the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah considered the returned exiles as the only legitimate descendants of the pre-exilic Israel.

On this note, the returned exiles perceived themselves exclusively as 'Yahweh's people'. This picture is depicted frequently in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to the point that the Jews or Israelites who had remained in the land of Judah/Israel during the Babylonian exile are ignored or treated as outsiders, foreigners or as 'non-Yahweh's people' together with the rest of the other neighbouring people.

- Foreigners, aliens, sojourners or people(s) of the land

These terms are used interchangeably to describe those who are not Israelites by descent or those of Israelite descent who had not gone into the Babylonian exile. In the book of Ezra and Nehemiah, other terms are used to describe such groups, namely, 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, Ashdodites, Arabs, Sidonians, Tyrians and certain other tribes who were living around the Trans-Euphrates area.