

## CHAPTER 5

### PERSPECTIVES ON ‘YAHWEH’S PEOPLE’ IN EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will discuss two contesting theological perspectives in Ezra and Nehemiah. The contestation concerns the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ as well as other nations, foreigners or aliens during the early post-exilic period (539-350 BC). I will describe the issues that show evidence of the tension in Ezra and Nehemiah. These matters include the reconstruction of structural projects (such as altar, temple, and wall), as well as, religious, social, and cultural reforms conducted by Ezra, Nehemiah and the Judean returned exiles during this period.

A close reading of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah builds the impression that there are exclusive and inclusive theological viewpoints in the books. These concern the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ and ‘other nations’, ‘foreigners’ or ‘non-exiles’ (cf Ezr 2:59-63; 4:1-3; 9:1-5; Neh 2:20; 10:28-39; 13:1-9, 15-29).

Farisani (2003:35) confirms this when he argues:

“When one reads Ezra-Nehemiah, one immediately detects a contestation between the returned exiles and the *am haaretz*. By the returned exiles here we are referring to all the Jews who were taken into exile by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., and returned back home with the assistance of the Persian King Cyrus in 539 B.C. The *am haaretz* are those Jews who did not go into Babylonian exile but stayed in Palestine”.

On the one hand, a close reading of Ezra and Nehemiah reveals that there is an 'exclusive' theological perspective in the books.<sup>135</sup> This group looks at non-exiles and the peoples of the land (*am ha' arets*) as 'foreigners' or aliens; and primarily as people who did not belong to Yahweh.<sup>136</sup> Some of the returned Judean exiles who adhered to this exclusive theological viewpoint regarded other people as a threat to the religious, political, economic, social life, and progress of the new community.

As a matter of fact, one of the factors that prompted this suspicion against other people was the underlying assumption that the returned Judean exiles were exclusively 'Yahweh's people', while others were not (cf Ezr 4:1-3; 9:1-2; Neh 2:20; 9:1-3; 13:1-3). Accordingly, the rest of the non-exiles and other peoples of the land were treated as those who did not belong to Yahweh and were therefore foreigners to this region (cf Boccaccini 2002:82-83). This exclusive theological position also appears to be held by some of the leading religious and political figures during the early post-exilic period. These leading figures included Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and some of their associates. The feeling is that the far reaching religious, social, and cultural reforms narrated in Ezra and Nehemiah were motivated or driven largely by

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<sup>135</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 upon the suspicion held by some of the returning exiles that such people were biologically, geographically, or religiously different from them. Because of this suspicion, non-exiles were seen as outsiders rather than members of the Judean/Israelite community. In other words, since non-exiles were suspected to have originated from elsewhere rather than from the newly returned Judean community, they were excluded from certain religious and communal assemblies of the newly returned Jewish community (cf Van Wyk & Breytenbach 2001:1256; Smith 1996:555-556).

<sup>136</sup> See *Excursus* on the terms associated with the *golah* community as the 'people of Yahweh' in chapter 5.4.

those who adhered to this exclusive theological position concerning other nations, foreigners, or other peoples of the land (*am ha' arets*).

On the other hand, there is an inclusive theological perspective in Ezra and Nehemiah that views other nations, foreigners and non-exiles, who were living in and around Judah during and after the exile, with sympathy and appreciation (cf Ezr 1:1-3; 3:7; 4:2; 6:13-14; 10:15; Neh 2:8-9). Those who adhered to this inclusive theological viewpoint considered the alleged foreigners as partners, friends, and human beings whom Yahweh could use to achieve his holy plans and purposes. To a larger extent, the adherents of this position appear to have been more open to foreigners than those who subscribed to the exclusive viewpoint.

This inclusive theological perspective does not necessarily see every foreigner as a threat to the Jewish/Israelites' identity and relationship with Yahweh. The view perceived others as legitimate human beings who could ally with Israel in religious matters as well as social and communal life. It also incorporated every human being who embraced Yahweh, the God of Israel, as his/her God, as part of 'Yahweh's people'. This inclusive theological standpoint was held by a few individuals among the returned exiles and some of the non-exiles as well as certain foreigners/other people who were living in and around Judah during and after the exile (cf Ezr 3:7; 4:2; 6:8-9, 13, 21; 7:21-23; 8:36; 9:1-2; 10:15 ).

Therefore, in what follows, this investigation will expose and describe the two contesting theological perspectives. The concept of 'Yahweh's people', in my judgment, underlies the contestation between these exclusive and inclusive theological standpoints, as might be shown from the proceeding discussions.

## **5. 2 EZRA NARRATIVE**

There are several matters in the Ezra narrative that have exposed the contestation between the exclusive and inclusive theological perspectives on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations, foreigners, or non-exiles. The issues include the reconstruction of structural projects (cf king Cyrus' orders - Ezc 1:1-11, altar - Ezc 3:1-6 and temple - Ezc 3:7-6:22), religious, and social reforms (cf Ezc 6:19-22; 9:1-10:44) conducted by Ezra and the leaders of the returned exiles, including their associates. The examination of the Ezra narrative will focus on the conception of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations or foreigners by the two opposing theological viewpoints. These opposing theological perspectives are evidenced in the following subject matters.

### **5.2.1 Structural projects**

#### **5. 2.1.1 King Cyrus' orders**

A narrative from the book of Ezra identified an outstanding foreigner, king Cyrus, as Yahweh's instrument (cf Ezc 1:1-11; Is 41:2, 25; 44:28-45:1, 13; Jer 25:11-12; 29:10; 51:9-11). This sympathetic report about a foreigner or a non-exilic person portrayed an inclusive theological viewpoint. For example, king

Cyrus' work is reported to have been completely driven by divine conviction from the heart.<sup>137</sup> Cyrus appeared to do nothing except that which fulfilled Yahweh's promise through the prophet Jeremiah (cf Ezr 1:1; Jer 25:11-12; 27:22; 29:10; 51:1-12). A foreign king was unlikely to obtain the knowledge of Yahweh. He could not access Yahweh's prophetic promises. But in this passage, the king is reported to have been in full compliance with Yahweh's prophetic promises concerning Israel. From the inclusive point of view, it is possible for a foreigner to be used by Yahweh to accomplish his divine purposes.

But this portrayal of a foreign king claiming to have received a special commission from Yahweh to release his people and to rebuild his temple in Jerusalem raises a concern. The concern is about the authenticity of the content of this decree (cf Ezr1:1-4).

According to some scholars (cf Bright 2000:362, Throntveit 1992:14, Breneman 1993:67 and Klein 1999:678), it is evident from an inscription found on the Cyrus Cylinder that king Cyrus had a political motive for freeing the captives. The king believed, that, if the captives could be given a certain level of religious and socio-political autonomy, they would be more loyal to his administration (cf also Albertz 2003:116). In view of this, it is argued that Cyrus freed all the captives. Not only were those from Judah set free, but also those from other nations. Furthermore, the Cyrus Cylinder also names

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<sup>137</sup> The place where knowledge, wisdom, love and rationality dwells, according to the Hebrew wisdom literature (cf Pr 3:1, 5; 4:21, 23; 6:21; 7:3; 10:8; 22:17-18; 23:15).

*Marduk* as the god who appointed Cyrus as king. It was not Yahweh, as presupposed by Ezra 1:1-4 (cf Blenkinsopp 1989:75; Clines 1984:34-37).

Concerning the authenticity of the content of this decree, it has also been suggested that (cf Williamson 1985:9-10) the biblical writer or editor was not only concerned with facts of history but most of all with the divine ordering and theological interpretation of the facts of history. From a theological perspective, Cyrus' actions were done in order to fulfil the word of prophet Jeremiah (cf Jer 25:11-12; 27:22; 29:10; 51:1-12). Consequently, Yahweh's sole purpose for raising Cyrus was to destroy Babylon and to assure that the temple might be built in Jerusalem and that the exiles might return. Cyrus, from the author(s)/editor(s) viewpoint, was subservient to Yahweh's purposes for his exiled people.

There is also support for a theory that the content of this decree of Cyrus, as reflected in Ezra 1:1-4, is not authentic (cf Grabbe (1998b:128). Several factors have been cited to support this viewpoint (cf Albertz 2003:121). First, the theological colouring of the text suggests that Cyrus' edict must have been edited to suit the ideology or theological predisposition of the writer(s)/editor(s) of Ezra. Second, there is no convincing parallel to the decree of Cyrus as reflected in the book of Ezra. All the known decrees of Cyrus differ significantly from the one in Ezra. Third, the fact that the decree is written in Hebrew creates suspicion that it must have been an insertion or

invention of another writer since it is unlikely for Cyrus to have written a decree in the Hebrew language.<sup>138</sup>

It could, however, be argued that whatever motive Cyrus might have possessed in his mind or whoever may have influenced him to release the exiles from Babylon, the author(s)/editor(s) reported that he was influenced by Yahweh, the God of Israel from the heart (cf Ezr 1:2). Therefore, the testimony of the author(s)/editor(s) of the book of Ezra 1:1-2 on Cyrus' decree should be given the benefit of the doubt concerning authenticity of this decree. The reasons being the following:

- First, it is a historical fact that some of the exiles had returned to Jerusalem as suggested by this decree.
- Second, the temple was also rebuilt, though, not without some difficulty, as indicated by the same decree.
- Third, the reconstruction of the city and its walls took place without any stiff resistance from the Persian administration (except for the Trans-Euphrates regional government – Ezr 4:1-24; 6:13-14; Neh 4:1-23; 6:1-19).

Therefore, the above enumerated successes suggest that there was a general positive predisposition from the Persian government towards the

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<sup>138</sup> Previously, Hamrick (1970:433) reasoned that the Persian government was most likely in consultation with the leaders of the Jewish exiles about their return to Judah. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that this edict reflected a Jewish flavour. It is also possible that the author(s) of Ezra may have retouched the document. But it should be born in mind that the Persian king was also concerned with the welfare of the Jewish people as evidenced in one of the Cyrus Cylinders.

Jewish exiles as presupposed by this decree of Cyrus (Ezr 1:2-4). Consequently, it is likely that there was an attitude of cooperation between the Persian government and the leaders of the Jewish exiles. This cooperation provided a platform for the restoration of the temple, city/walls and the religious/social life of the newly returned community. These successes confirm the content of the decrees of Cyrus and that of the subsequent Persian kings to be essentially true.

Ezra 1:2 reports that Cyrus had acquired his authority from Yahweh, the God of heaven to rule the kingdoms of the earth and specifically to build a temple for him in Jerusalem in the territory of Judah. The narrative portrays Cyrus as resembling king Solomon (cf 1 Ki 5:4-6). Both of them had a common obligation from Yahweh, namely, the building of Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem. Both of them were renowned kings. They both recognized that Yahweh was responsible for giving them the political and religious mandate to rule and to build the temple. Ezra 1:1-4, therefore, is narrated from the inclusive theological standpoint. Since both their tasks are a mandate from Yahweh, no other person could successfully oppose or obstruct Yahweh's authoritative mandate. Thus, the tone is set for Yahweh's plan to take its course in the book of Ezra.

The description of events moves from verbal proclamation to actualization (cf Ezr 1:3-11). King Cyrus permitted the Jewish exiles to leave and rebuild the temple and urged that everyone (irrespective of their racial, ethnic, or



linguistic differences) should contribute to Yahweh's project (cf Ezr 1:2-6). Does this order imply that the exiles, exclusively, should rebuild the temple without involving other people who were living in and around Judah? This question is addressed in the section that deals with the reconstruction of the temple (cf 5.2.1.3).

Meanwhile, Cyrus also reverses the action of his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar. He removed all the temple articles (of the house of Yahweh), from the Babylonian temple. Cyrus handed the articles over to Sheshbazzar<sup>139</sup> the prince of Judah. Every item was counted, so that nothing was diverted to another place (cf Ezr 1:7-11). Then the first group set their feet on their way to Jerusalem (cf Ezr 2:1-70).

#### 5.2.1.2 Work on the altar

There is an allusion to the beginning of the tension between the returned exiles and other people who were living in and around Judah concerning the rebuilding of the altar (cf Ezr 3:1-6; see also Ex 20:24-25; 27:6-7). This narrative plot reflects an exclusive theological perspective. The work of rebuilding the altar begins and continues to the end amidst fears about the 'people of the land' (תַּאֲחָזְרֵי הָאֶרֶץ; cf Ezr 3:1-3). The phrase "amidst fears about the people of the land" in verse 3, seems to originate from the exclusive theological standpoint. The allusion to the fear entertained by

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<sup>139</sup> See the discussion on the identity of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel in chapter 2.5.

the returning exiles suggests that some people had been excluded from participating on the work of rebuilding of the altar.

My opinion is that the focus of this pericope (Ezr 3:1-6) is on the success of the reconstruction of the altar. The text also talks about the function of other people who were living in the land where the Jewish exiles had returned and resettled. The passage makes a claim that the people of the land (תְּאֵרֵי הָאֲרָצָה) constituted an object of threat and fear (חֹמֶת אֲבָיָה) for the Jewish exiles during their work on the altar (cf Ezr 3:3).

To my surprise, there is no indication from Ezra 3:1-6 on what these other people of the land might have done. There is no apparent reason for the fear entertained by the Judean exiles. Who are these people of the land? Are they Judean remnants who had stayed behind in Judah during the exile? Unfortunately, the text gives no answer to these questions. However, the people of the land could have been Judah's neighbors such as Edomites and other foreigners mentioned in Ezra 4:9-10 (cf Klein 1999:691; Blenkinsopp 1989:98). Similarly, these people were from Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, Edom, peoples of foreign descent (including part Jews) living in Judah, and Jews who had compromised their faith (cf Breneman 1993:91-92).

An altar was rebuilt in the past (cf Jr 41:5) after the destruction of the temple of Solomon. But the altar was destroyed by the returning Jews. Therefore, the

altar which is reported in Ezra 3:2-3 was the third one (cf Fensham 1982:59). The action of destroying the second altar engendered the tension between the peoples of the land and the newly returning Jewish exiles (Fensham 1982:59). This viewpoint lacks any literary or historical support and therefore, is not convincing. The role of the people of the land during the reconstruction of the altar was basically not appreciated. The reason is that *ῥΑc+r "a ]h ' yMeP [ ;me* (the people of the land) constituted an object of fear to those who were reconstructing the altar (cf 1 Esd 5:49-50).

#### 5.2.1.3 Work on the temple

This narrative of Ezra 3:7-6:22 deals with the reconstruction of the temple. The plot appears to be portrayed from an integrated exclusive and inclusive theological perspective. In my opinion, the two theological viewpoints were interwoven together to form a story plot, probably by the final author(s)/editor(s). The text depicts a series of mixed experiences between the newly returned exiles and those who surrounded them concerning the reconstruction of the temple.

On the one hand, the exclusive theological perspective seems to report that the returning Judean exiles commenced work on the rebuilding of the temple, but they encountered opposition from various enemies, individuals, groups, kings, or foreigners (cf Ezr 4:1-24). This opposition led to a delay on reconstructing the temple, for a certain period of time, before the building process was later resumed and completed.

On the other hand, the argument from the inclusive viewpoint is that despite the alleged opposition to the work of rebuilding of the temple, some people from foreign nations contributed positively to the reconstruction of the temple (cf Ezr 3:7; 6:8, 13-14). One example is the people of Tyre and Sidon.

Previously, Ezekiel 28:1-26 had portrayed the people of Tyre and Sidon as notorious idolaters who took pride in their beauty and knowledge; they dealt maliciously with Israel and other nations. Therefore, from the exclusive theological standpoint, there is no reason why the people of Tyre and Sidon could have participated in rebuilding the holy temple of Yahweh. They were foreigners and therefore, unholy seed (cf Ezr 9:2) and potential enemies of the newly returned Jewish community. But most importantly, the people of Tyre and Sidon were not conceived as 'Yahweh's people', according to the exclusive theological standpoint of the newly returned exiles.

However, Ezra 3:7 reports that the people of Sidon and Tyre contributed immensely to this work by supplying logs of wood from Lebanon (cf 1 Ki 5:18; 1 Chr 22:2, 4, 15; 2 Chr 2:8-18). Even the returned exiles welcomed the participation of these alleged foreigners. They provided food, drink and oil for the Tyrians and the Sidonians (cf 3:7b). It is rather unfortunate that when some of these surrounding people (the so-called enemies, cf Ezr 4:1) offered to assist in the same project, their request was turned down (cf Ezr 4:2-3). However, it turned out that the work was later completed at the orders of a foreigner, king Darius (cf Ezr 6:14-15).

There are two questions concerning the rejection of the peoples of the land to assist in the reconstruction of the temple (cf Ezr 4:1-3). First, how did the returnees identify those who offered to assist in the reconstruction work as enemies of the new community? Second, did Cyrus' orders (cf Ezr 1:1-4) specifically exclude other people from offering assistance to the work on the temple?

Ezra 4:1-5 is offered from the exclusive theological point of view. The passage reveals that the people, whose help was rejected, were enemies of the *golah* community. Therefore, they could not be allowed to assist in rebuilding the temple (cf Ezr 4:1). It is difficult to determine just how the returning Judean exiles identified these people as their enemies, prior to what these so-called enemies would do. The narrative, according to my judgement, suggests that the so-called enemies had made a genuine request. They wanted to assist in the reconstruction of the temple. They also provided the reason for their request (cf Ezr 4:2). These people claimed to have worshipped and sacrificed to Yahweh, the God of the returned exiles. This took place long before the exile had ended. I believe that this appeal to Yahweh and to their religious commitment to his cult should have been believed. Yet, the *golah* community did not accept their claim. This rejection has led to a suggestion that:

“the author's identification of the neighbors as the 'adversaries of Judah' (cf Ezr 4:1) may already prejudice the case. [The author] is so passionately in favor of the Golah community as the true Israel that one suspects that he sees every tactic of their neighbors in the worst possible light.

Should not there have been some investigation of the adversaries' claim to have worshipped the God of Israel for more than 150 years?" (Klein 1999:700).

In my opinion, the self introduction of the alleged enemies as people who were brought to the region by Esarhaddon (cf Ezr 4:2) marked them clearly as foreigners even though they may have lived here for more than 150 years.

Blenkinsopp (1989:107) notes that there was a deportation and a relocation of people under the period of Esarhaddon from 681 to 669 BC (cf also Fensham 1982:66; Is 7:8-9; Kidner 1979:49; 2 Ki 17:24). Therefore, it was possible for these people who were labelled as enemies to be Yahweh-worshippers as stated in their claim. There is scriptural indication (cf Jr 41:5) that after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple, a delegation from Samaria came down to the South in order to present offerings at the ruined site of the temple. Cohn-Sherbok (2003:78) also asserts that "after Nebuchadnezzar's invasion worshippers continued to make a pilgrimage to the Temple site. These Jews offered their assistance to Zerubbabel, but he refused since he did not regard them as real Jews: they were of uncertain racial origins and their worship was suspect."

The process by which the exiles perceived this request as non-authentic remains a puzzle. It is probable that the response was considered against the backdrop of the previous incident (cf Ezr 3:3; Klein 1999:694). The exiles had entertained fears of the people of the land during the reconstruction of the

altar. For some reason, the returning exiles rejected the request of their neighbours or alleged foreigners in categorical terms.<sup>140</sup>

Another reason why the leaders of the exiles claimed exclusive right to rebuild the temple was based on the orders of king Cyrus (cf Ezr 1:2-4; 4:3; 5:13, 16-17; 6:3-4). There is no clear indication, from the above texts, that the orders of Cyrus allowed the *golah* community exclusive right to reconstruct the temple without the support of others. If this order was so exclusive, the participation of the Sidonians and the Tyrians (cf Ezr 3:7) should have also been rejected. They also did not belong to the *golah* community. But the fact that the people of Sidon and Tyre were allowed to help with the reconstruction work points to the reality that Cyrus' orders were not as strictly exclusive as the Jewish leaders appeared to portray in this incident (cf Ezr 4:1-3).

Blenkinsopp (1989:107) dismissed the above claim. He argues that the appeal to Cyrus' orders was a smoke screen purposefully designed by the Jewish leaders to conceal the real motive for the rejection of the request. According to him, there were other reasons that might have led to this rejection. First, it was possible that the syncretic religious practice of the petitioners contributed to the rejection of their offer for assistance (cf Hg 2:10-14). Second, a major part of the opposition toward the restoration of the Judean state and its religious and political structures came from this

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<sup>140</sup> "But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us" (Ezr 4:3 NASB).

surrounding region. This gives the impression that both the offer to assist and its rejection were motivated by political factors (cf Fensham 1982:67). If the Jewish leaders had accepted the offer to share the labour, the petitioners would have obtained a measure of administrative control over the temple and its services.

Grabbe (2000b:406) questioned the authenticity of Cyrus' order. He reasoned that the order had been reworked by the editor(s) of Ezra to such an extent that it cannot be trusted to have been authentic as depicted in the book of Ezra. The reworking seems to be ideological. He also, argues that the editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah portray the population of the land of Judah as if there were no Jews left behind during the deportation. He, therefore, insists that a substantial number of people still remained in the land after the deportation. These had taken over the farms and important areas. As a result, it was to be expected that a conflict would ensue over several subject matters between the Jews who stayed in the land during the exile and those who returned from the Babylonian exile (cf Washington 2003:429-430; Ezk 8:1-18; 11:14-21; 33:23-29). Therefore, the tension between the people of the land and the *golah* community concerning the rebuilding of the altar, temple, city walls, and the issues of intermarriage should be understood at the backdrop of this anticipated conflict.



The following unfolding events appear to support Grabbe's (2000b:406) conclusion. The people of the land<sup>141</sup>, after the rejection of their request, unfortunately reverted to a series of embarrassing political and social disturbances. These included threats, frustration, discouragement and opposition toward the reconstruction of the temple. In addition, they used political strategies that succeeded in halting the project for a period of time.<sup>142</sup>

Ezra 4:3-24 depicts an exclusive theological standpoint; hence, non-exiles or foreigners are portrayed in the narrative plot from the darkest possible manner as enemies to the cause of Yahweh and his people.

On the contrary, from an inclusive theological perspective, it is pointed out that the work was later resumed and completed not only through Yahweh's initiative, but also at the orders of a foreign king (cf Ezr 6:1-22). From the exclusive theological standpoint, there was no partnership between foreigners (including their kings) and the returned Jewish exiles (cf Ezr 3:3; 4:3). Nevertheless, Ezra 6:13-15 portrays a different point of view. This narrative

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<sup>141</sup> "The people around them". This is one way of characterizing those who were excluded from the *golah* community. Some of these people were identified by names such as Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, Shimshai (Ezr 4:7-9, 17, 23), Tattenai-governor of Trans-Euphrates and Shethar-Bozenai (Ezr 5:3, 6; 6:6, 13). Klein (1999:695) explains that during the post-exilic period particularly in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the term 'people around them' refers to those who have not gone to exile, those who were not considered to be Jews, and those who were not full members of the *golah* (exile) community.

<sup>142</sup> On the contrary, Hg 1:2 indicates that the work on the house of Yahweh was stopped by the initiative of the *golah* community. There is no indication in the book of Haggai to show that the work had been stopped by the peoples of the land who were opposed to it.

reveals that the work had succeeded as a result of Yahweh's command, but also as a result of the decrees of foreign kings.<sup>143</sup>

From an inclusive theological viewpoint, Yahweh, the God of Israel, uses other people who might be considered by the *golah* community as unholy to accomplish Yahweh's holy purposes. However, from the exclusive theological perspective, this text, Ezra 6: 13-15, portrays an absurd report because foreigners are alleged to have contributed positively to the success of Yahweh's programme.

In the preceding section, I have examined various issues concerning the reconstruction of structural projects. The projects included king Cyrus' order (Ezr 1:1-11), altar (Ezr 3:1-6) and temple (Ezr 3:7-6:22). I have argued that these subjects reveal the tension between the exclusive and inclusive perspectives. The *golah* community is depicted in the construction of the projects as 'Yahweh's people'. The peoples of the land are excluded from the so-called 'Yahweh's people group'. But the peoples of the land also made some attempts to be recognized as 'Yahweh's people'. This continued until the end of the above named projects.

In the following, I will examine the religious, social, and cultural reforms of Ezra and his associates. The discussion will reveal how the tension between the inclusive and exclusive theological positions continued to the end of the

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<sup>143</sup> These include kings Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes (cf Ezr 6:14-15). The kings performed as a result of Yahweh's initiative.

book. It will also reveal how the concept of ‘Yahweh’s people’ lay behind this contestation.

## **5.2.2 Religious, social and cultural reforms**

### 5.2.2.1 Celebration of the Passover

This narrative of Ezra 6:19-22 provides an allusion to the subject of foreigners who celebrated the Passover festival with the *golah* community. The plot portrays an inclusive theological stance on the Passover celebration. The sense of the passage suggests that the returned exiles celebrated their Passover not only with their corporate Israelite returnees, but also with other gentiles, who had separated themselves from the practices of their gentile neighbours (cf Ezr 6:21<sup>144</sup>; Williamson 1985:85; Klein 1999:713).

Breneman (1993:121) and Keil and Delitzsch (1975b:92) assert that these people who separated themselves from the practices of their gentile neighbours were Jews who had remained in the land during the exile (cf also Throntveit 1992:36; Batten 1972:153). However, Klein (1999:713) and Williamson (1985:85) objected to that viewpoint by insisting that the people were gentiles rather than Jews (cf also Blenkinsopp 1989:132-133; Myers 1965:54). Klein (1999:713) cites two passages from the Pentateuch (cf Ex 12:43-49 & Nm 9:14) to support his viewpoint that foreigners were allowed to participate in the Passover if they were circumcised.

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<sup>144</sup> Ezr 6:21 “And the sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to *join* them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, at *the Passover*.”

Similarly, Kidner (1979:60) had previously argued that this verse is an important one purportedly written in order to correct the impression from Ezra 4:1-3 that the returned Jewish community was an exclusive party. This exclusivist impression persists in other incidents though, but in this particular passage, those who converted to Yahweh-cult, found an open door in Israel as for example, Rahab and Ruth had done. Therefore, it is most probable that the people who celebrated the Passover together with the exiles may have been foreigners or gentiles who had separated themselves from their gentile practices.

Clines (1984:97) takes an integrated position by arguing that the phrase “all those who separated themselves from the uncleanness of their gentile neighbours”(cf Ezr 6:21) refers to both the Jews who had not gone into exile as well as the gentiles who had sought and embraced Yahweh the God of Israel.

My viewpoint is that Ezra 6:21 presents an inclusive theological viewpoint concerning the celebration of the Passover. The above phrase is likely to refer not only to the Jews who remained in the land but also to non-Jews who had separated themselves from their gentile practices in order to seek Yahweh, the God of Israel. By implication, the text makes a distinction on the one side, between gentiles or foreigners who may relate with the *golah* community in religious matters and, on the other side those who may not. The

passage seems to emphasize the separation from gentile practices and the seeking of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The celebration of the Passover was permissible to other nations, aliens or foreigners, who were circumcised (cf Ex 12:17-20, 48-49; Nm 9:14). This criterion was part of the fundamentals in becoming a covenant member and for inclusion in the Passover celebration. Therefore, it is most likely that this criterion was not abandoned after the exile; rather, it was emphasized and applied to this incident in order to highlight the continuity of the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants for this post-exilic community. The two covenants are portrayed as part of the basis on which religious, political and social reforms of both Ezra and Nehemiah were conducted (cf Ezr 9:11-14; Neh 1:5-10; 9: 7-8).

But the question is: will the above criterion stand the test of time in the new community or will it be sidelined as new religious leaders emerge and re-interpret the Torah of Moses? This question should be kept in mind as we continue to examine subsequent narrative plots.

#### 5.2.2.2 Marriage reforms

From Ezra 7:1 to the end of the book, the narrative introduces Ezra, the priest and scribe. He seems to function as the leading figure in the matters that have been described in the subsequent narrative plots. Ezra is armed with orders from a foreign king Artaxerxes to execute religious reforms and in addition, to carry out other executive functions (cf Ezr 7:1-10:44).

The story continues with Ezra delivering the contributions to the temple as well as the orders from the king to the governors and leaders of Trans-Euphrates (cf Ezr 8:24-36). The local leaders were directed by the foreign king, as reflected in the orders, to provide assistance to Ezra's mission. The function of the assumed enemies is reversed by the orders of this foreign king. Instead of being an instrument of threat and confusion, the orders from Artaxerxes mandated the leaders of Trans-Euphrates to assist in the success of Ezra's mission in whatever way possible. In Ezra 4:1-24, the peoples of the land had offered to assist in the reconstruction of the temple but their offer was rejected. Thus, the rest of that chapter describes how these alleged foreigners frustrated the work and brought it to a standstill.

But now, the orders of the foreign king helped to change the position of the *golah* community; thus, they accepted the contribution from the leaders of the Trans-Euphrates (cf Ezr 8:36). This was what the peoples of the land had already offered to do earlier but their offer to assist in the reconstruction of the temple had been rejected by the returnees (cf Ezr 4:1-3). Now, the support of the peoples of the land is mandated by the orders from a foreign king and surprisingly, their support is welcomed by the leaders of the *golah* community. Would Ezra take a moderate view and policy toward the peoples of the land or would he side with adherents of the exclusive perspective (cf Ezr 4:2-3)? The issue of intermarriage unveils how Ezra responded to the matters relating to foreigners, aliens, peoples of the land, and other nations.

The story plot of Ezra 9:1-10:44 is recounted from an exclusive theological perspective. Part of the story, especially Ezra 9:1-15, is a first person narrative, probably by Ezra himself. The remaining part, mainly Ezra 10:1-44, is narrated by another person (author(s)/editor(s)).

As Ezra faces his mission, he does not waste much time in making it known that he had encountered a serious fundamental religious wrongdoing among the alleged 'holy race'. This wrongdoing is intermarriage (cf Ezr 9:1-2<sup>145</sup>). Ezra spends a substantial part of his time handling this fundamental religious and social anomaly (cf Ezr 9:3-10:44). He clearly stated the problem:

- The people of Israel have joined the peoples of the land in their abominations; and
- That they have also mingled the 'holy seed' with the peoples of the land by intermarrying with them (cf Ezr 9:1-2).

The identity of the peoples of the land has already been discussed previously<sup>146</sup> but a distinction is made in Ezra 9:1-2, to classify the two groups of people who are involved in the alleged problem. Therefore, it is worth discussing the question of identity once again in order to clarify and conceptualize the nature of the problem in the narrative plot.

It is evident from Ezra 9:1-2 that the people who are labelled "the peoples of the land" are not Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites,

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<sup>145</sup> Ezr 9:2 says:  $\tau A c r ' a ] h ' y M e [ ; B . v d , Q o h ; [ r ; z < W b r > [ ' t . h i$  (i.e. They have mortgaged the holy seed with the people of the land).

<sup>146</sup> See the section on the reconstruction of the altar in chapter 5.2.1.2.

Moabites, Egyptians, or Amorites (cf Breneman 1993:148). The accusation clearly reveals that the people in question have similar practices to those of the other nations listed from above. Therefore I support the viewpoint that the peoples of the land are not one of these above mentioned Canaanite tribes.

The peoples of the land (Ezr 9:1-2) are those who had not gone into exile and who had not been fully absorbed into the *golah* community (Klein 1999:733). At the time of Ezra, the Canaanite tribes that have been listed in Ezra 9:1 did not exist anymore (Clines 1984:119). The peoples of the land in this incident are non-Jewish or partly-Jewish descendants of the Moabites and the Edomites who were living in and around Judah during and after the exile (Clines 1984:119; Blenkinsopp 1989:175). Accordingly, the editor(s)/author(s) of this narrative brought a list of heathen nations together probably from Genesis 15:19-21; Exodus 3:8, 17; 33:2; 34:11; Nehemiah 9:8 and Deuteronomy 7:1-6 et cetera, in order to indicate that there is prohibition of intermarriage with heathen nations in the *torah*.

The reason why the prohibition of intermarriage was applied to this situation is doubtful because the Law did not prohibit intermarriage between the Israelites and the Edomites or the Egyptians (Clines 1984:119; cf Dt 23:7). Therefore, it is assumed that Ezra and his associates might have re-interpreted the deuteronomic law (cf Dt 7:3-4) and re-applied it to the new situation to support the current religious and social exclusive reforms (Clines 1984:119).



The above assumption also finds support from a research conducted by Eskenazi and Judd (1994:266-285) on the sociological and theological classification of the strange women in Ezra 9-10. Their findings suggested that these women, classified as strangers, were not really strangers as the editor(s)/author(s) may have presupposed. The women may have been Judahites or Israelites who had never gone into either the Assyrian or the Babylonian exile (cf Grabbe 2000a:15). Thus, it may have happened that the early Jewish returnees saw these women as appropriate marriage partners. This assumption is also sustained by the fact that Ezra 9:1-2 does not recognize these women as Ammonites or Canaanites people because they were not. Rather, the notion of redefining the identity of true Israelites during the early post-exilic period appears to have made these women to be considered or labelled as foreigners (cf Grabbe 1998b:138).

On hearing this charge against the returning exiles (Ezr 9:1-2), Ezra breaks into tears, rends his clothing, and pulls out his hair and sits down for the whole day (cf Ezr 9:3). Everyone who trembled at this incident joined Ezra in his self-abasement (9:4). Ezra confessed Israel's sin later in the evening (cf Ezr 9:5-10:4). He made the case very obvious: intermarriage between these returned exiles and other peoples of the land constituted a serious breach of Yahweh's covenant laws. First, the holy race is mingled (cf Ezr 9:3). Second, intermarriage is viewed as an act of making a covenant with the people of the land (cf Ezr 9:11-12). Third, intermarriage also means that the *golah* community was being unfaithful to Yahweh and to his covenant (cf Ezr 10:2).

How could this great religious and social transgression be remedied? The next pericope provides a solution from an exclusive theological standpoint.

The narrative (Ezr 10:3) makes it obvious that the only alternative solution to the above problem was the renewal of the covenant. The covenant between Yahweh and the *golah* community or the holy race (seed) must be renewed. During such a ceremony, every person who had married a foreign woman was required to divorce that woman together with her children. That meant total or absolute separation from foreigners. Most people accepted the plan to divorce the so-called foreign women (Ezr 10:10-15). Only a handful of people did not accept the proposal (cf Keil & Delitzsch 1975b:131). It is argued that the four people mentioned in Ezra 10:15 took a more rigid and exclusive approach than the divorce proposal (Klein 1999:742-743; Williamson 1985:156-157). On the contrary, Keil & Delitzsch (1975b:131) assert that the four people actually opposed the divorce proposal. These were more sympathetic towards the alleged foreigners than the majority of the returnees who accepted the divorce proposal.

The fact that the stance of the four men is not explained in this passage may suggest that they had taken an opposite view concerning the decision to divorce the alleged foreign women (cf Allen 2003: 80). It is most likely that the whole community may have prevailed over the four men. Thus, since the majority is expected to carry the vote, the divorce proceedings were carried out on the insistence of the majority. Finally, those who rejected the above

divorce proceedings were ignored (cf Ezr 10:15; see Van Wyk & Breytenbach 2001:1256). As a consequence, the process of divorce took its toll upon the alleged foreign women and their children (cf Ezr 10:18-44).

In view of the divorce proceedings, the question may be asked: which book of the Law did Ezra use as his basis for this painful divorce solution? Did Ezra derive the law prohibiting intermarriage from Deuteronomy 7:3<sup>147</sup>? Grabbe (1998b:146-147) explained that the book of the Law (or Moses) referred to in several passages by Ezra and Nehemiah may have been the complete Pentateuch (cf also Graham 1998:206). This does not mean that the Law book was the final copy as we have it in the canon today. It only means Ezra had all five books of the Pentateuch in his Law book. Grabbe (1998b:146-147) also noted that Ezra and Nehemiah contain several passages that have been derived from all the five books of the Pentateuch.<sup>148</sup>

If Deuteronomy 7:3 was Ezra's basis, it looks to me as if the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra re-interpreted this passage in a peculiar way in order to support Ezra's exclusive religious and social reforms (cf Blenkinsopp 1988:200-201). It is evident from the context of Deuteronomy 7:3 that idolatry was the focus of the prohibition. Nowhere in the Pentateuch do we find an explicit rejection of intermarriage without the worship of foreign gods as the

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<sup>147</sup> Dt 7:3 "Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons."

<sup>148</sup> See a detail discussion on the book of Moses/Law in chapter 2.6.

main reason for that prohibition (cf also Breneman 1993:149; Williamson 1985:130-131).

It is a further question of how Ezra would interpret other biblical passages<sup>149</sup> that clearly contained cases of intermarriage between the Israelites and other people or foreigners. The above mentioned passages indicate that foreigners who embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel, could intermarry legitimately with the people of Israel. Ezra referred to Moses' law as the basis on which his divorce proceedings were sustained. But Moses is reported to have married an African woman<sup>150</sup> (cf Nm 12:1-3). Therefore, a conclusion could be made that Ezra re-interpreted the deuteronomic passage or a related law to support his exclusive religious and social reforms.

However, it is a fact that Ezra's decision on intermarriage was unacceptable to some other people (cf Ezr 10:15<sup>151</sup>). The passage provides a hint of this opposition but fails to tell what really happened to those who opposed Ezra's divorce proposal. Were these opponents excluded from Israel together with their families or were they allowed to remain among the supposed 'holy race'?

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<sup>149</sup> See e.g. the cases of Tamar in Gn 38:6-30, cf. Mt 1:3; Ruth in Rt 1:16-17; 4:13-22, cf. Mt 1:5b; Rahab in Jos 6:22-23, cf. Mt 1:5a and Bathsheba in 2 Sm 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25, cf. Mt 1:6b et cetera.

<sup>150</sup> Moses' wife is reported to be a Cushite woman. The word *Cush* is used in many instances to refer to the black race or Africa (cf Adamo 2001:11-15; Olson 1996:70-71). According to Adamo, Ethiopia is mostly identified with Cush in biblical stories (cf Gn 2:13; 2 Ki 19:9; Is 11:11; 20:3-5; 43:3; 45:14; Ezk 30:4-5; 38:5; Nah 3:9). He (2001:15) therefore argues convincingly that Moses' wife was from Cush or Africa and not from Arabia or elsewhere as presupposed by others (cf Davies 1995:118-119; Budd 1984:136; Baldwin s.a: 349).

<sup>151</sup> Ezr 10:15 "Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them."

(seed)? It is not known, but the probability is that the latter option was carried out.

Eskenazi and Judd (1994:285) already indicated from their sociological studies that these women were unjustly excluded from the *golah* community by the reforms of Ezra. There are several important points which could be deducted from Eskenazi and Judd's research findings:

- First, it can hardly be proven from the text of Ezra 9-10 that these women who were expelled from the *golah* community were foreigners like Ammonites or Canaanites as Ezra's reforms appeared to have presupposed.
- Second, these women were not members of the returned exiles; rather, they were in the land during and after the exile. Thus, part of the reasons they were identified as 'peoples of the land' was that they had remained in the land during the exile.
- Third, the fact that Ezra and his associates attempted to redefine the concept of 'Yahweh's people' exclusively as the *golah* community, inevitably rendered these women as 'non-Yahweh's people'; therefore, foreigners in their own land and unfit to intermarry with the *golah* community.

Ezra's concept of holiness (cf Ezra 9:2<sup>152</sup>) concerning the *golah* community is irreconcilable with other passages like Deuteronomy 9:4-6.<sup>153</sup> Both the pre-exilic Israel and the *golah* community had possessed the land not because of their own righteousness or holiness. According to the deuteronomic passage, it was because of the wickedness of the nations. But in this incident, the women who are divorced from their partners were not reported to be wicked as described by the deuteronomic law. Nothing is specifically said about these women except that they were not members of the redefined Israelite (*golah*) community. The narrative leaves the reader(s) pondering even about the situation concerning the families that had been separated. What was the fate of the babies and women that were left without a male supporter and vice versa? How will such children deal with the reality of being separated from their families (cf Klein 1999:746)? There are no answers given to these questions. The book of Ezra ends on this sad note.

### 5.2.3 Conclusion

In the preceding section, we have been discussing the tension between the *golah* community and the peoples of the land concerning the reconstruction of

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<sup>152</sup> Ezr 10:2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as *wives* for themselves and for their sons, so that **the holy race has intermingled** with the peoples of the lands."

<sup>153</sup> Dt 9:4-6 says: "4 Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD is dispossessing them before you. 5 "It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 6 "Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness *that* the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people".

structural projects in the land (cf king Cyrus' orders Ezr 1:1-11, the altar Ezr 3:1-6 and temple Ezr 3:7-6:22); religious and social reforms (cf Ezr 6:19-22; 9:1-10:44) conducted by Ezra and the leaders of the returned exiles, including their associates. The discussion on the Ezra narrative reveals that the concept of 'Yahweh's people' is used to denote exclusively the *golah* community from an exclusive theological perspective.

However, the concept of 'Yahweh's people' was also viewed from an inclusive theological point of view, where it not only includes the *golah* community, but also all other people who embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel as their God. Therefore, there is tension in the book between the two theological perspectives concerning the concept of Yahweh's people and concerning other nations, foreigners or the peoples of the land. This inclusive theological perspective has been sidelined, suppressed or ignored at certain points.

The following discussion will also focus on a similar tension between the two perspectives as portrayed in the book of Nehemiah.

### **5.3 NEHEMIAH NARRATIVE**

There are several matters from the Nehemiah narrative that expose the contestation between an exclusive and an inclusive theological perspectives concerning the concept of Yahweh's people and concerning other nations or foreigners. These issues include the reconstruction of structural projects (like the orders from Artaxerxes about the reconstruction of the walls and city of Jerusalem), and religious and social reforms conducted by Nehemiah and the

elders of the returned Jewish community. The discussion will focus on the two theological perspectives as exposed in the above mentioned matters. The concept of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations, foreigners or other peoples of the land underlies this tension.

### **5.3.1 Structural projects**

#### 5.3.1.1 King Artaxerxes' orders

In this narrative plot (cf Neh 1:1-11), Nehemiah hears a disturbing report about the returning exiles and the city of Jerusalem (cf Ant 11:159-163<sup>154</sup>). He is deeply moved by the plight of those who have returned from exile to Jerusalem. This narrative plot depicts an exclusive theological standpoint. The story focused on describing the deplorable plight of the *golah* community and the city of Jerusalem (cf Fensham 1982:151). The living conditions of those who had remained in the land during the exile period appear to have been ignored. Rather the people who remained in the land together with the so-called foreigners are portrayed in a bad spotlight (cf Neh 2:10, 19-20; 4:1-23; 6:1-19). Nehemiah, therefore, plans to rebuild the city wall in order to ease the plight of the people who had returned from exile to Jerusalem (cf Neh 2:5). He is determined to uplift the status of the *golah* community from shame and disgrace to honour and dignity (cf Neh 2:17).

Hence forth, there are incidents where the concern to establish the *golah* community exclusively as Yahweh's people is met with resistance from the

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<sup>154</sup> Josephus' Works: Antiquities.



peoples of the land. These peoples of the land also wanted to associate with the *golah* community in religious and social life as ‘Yahweh’s people’. Consequently, the peoples of the land are described either as enemies to the cause of Nehemiah (from an exclusive theological perspective) or as source of help toward the same cause (from an inclusive theological perspective). There are striking similarities between the narrative plot of Nehemiah 2:1-9 and the plot in Ezra 1:1-11. First, in both instances, it is a foreign king who provides orders for a project to be carried out in Judah. King Cyrus gave the orders to reconstruct the temple (cf Ezr 1:1-4), while king Artaxerxes gave the orders for the city wall to be rebuilt (cf Neh 2:8).

Second, in both cases, Yahweh is reported to have worked in specific individuals to accomplish the desired purposes for the *golah* community. For example, in Ezra 1:1, Yahweh stirred up the heart of king Cyrus to provide the orders to free the exiles and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 2:8, 18, God hears Nehemiah’s prayers and places his good hand upon Nehemiah in order that the requests he had made to king Artaxerxes were answered in his favour. Therefore, Nehemiah’s narrative on the favourable predisposition of the king toward his requests depicts a foreigner in a bright limelight. This narrative plot portrays an inclusive theological perspective. A foreign king becomes Yahweh’s instrument to provide favourable conditions to improving the plight of Yahweh’s people. Also, the wife of Artaxerxes does

not raise any objection to Yahweh's cause (cf Neh 2:6). It seems that she was favourably predisposed to the plan to grant Nehemiah's requests.<sup>155</sup>

A third similarity is that Nehemiah received letters from a foreign king, Artaxerxes, who ordered the governors and leaders of Trans-Euphrates to support his cause (cf Neh 2:7-9) just as Ezra did (cf Ezr 7:11-28). Unfortunately, the leaders of the Trans-Euphrates, on hearing this news, were disturbed, because someone had come to promote the welfare of the Jews (cf Neh 2:10). The question was: will these foreigners support Nehemiah's cause as was the case with Ezra (cf Ezr 8:36)? Or will they become instruments of threat and intimidation to Nehemiah's cause?

These first two chapters of Nehemiah might create mixed feelings in the reader about the role of foreigners for Israel or particularly for the *golah* community. On the one hand, foreigners, such as king Artaxerxes and his wife showed a favourable attitude toward Yahweh's cause. They supported it by providing written orders to the leaders of the region to assist the project. On the other hand, other foreigners supposedly expressed bad sentiments toward the plan which would improve the conditions of the returned exiles (cf Neh 2:10, 19). With this ill will, the question arises: what would constitute the nature of the role of foreigners in Yahweh's cause? Would the peoples of the land support or derail the cause of reconstructing the wall which was

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<sup>155</sup> Kidner (1979:81) argues that the mention of the queen may suggest that the positive action of the king toward Nehemiah's request may have been influenced by the queen (cf also Blenkinsopp 1989:215).

spearheaded by Nehemiah? This subject will be discussed from the section that follows.

### 5.3.1.2 Work on the city wall

In the Nehemiah narrative plots (cf Neh 2:10, 19-20; 4:1-23; 6:1-7:3), non-exiles attempted to derail Yahweh's work which Nehemiah had come to accomplish. Some of the alleged foreigners/enemies (i.e. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem; cf Neh 2:10, 19-20) expressed their negative sentiments about the prospect of the returned exiles. As result, they began to try to sabotage the work. This narrative depicts an exclusive theological point of view concerning 'Yahweh's people' and concerning other nations or foreigners. Sanballat<sup>156</sup> the Horonite, Tobiah<sup>157</sup> the Ammonite official and Geshem<sup>158</sup> the Arab are not portrayed as part of Yahweh's people even though some of them seemed to be Yahweh worshippers. As the story in Nehemiah progresses, these three figures are portrayed in the darkest possible way. They are regarded as enemies to the cause of Yahweh and his people. Every move on

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<sup>156</sup> Sanballat's place of origin-Horonite is reported from Scripture and from other sources variously (cf Blenkinsopp 1989:216-217) as one of the regions surrounding the land of Judah namely, 1. Hauran (cf Ezk 47:16, 18) east of the Sea of Galilee; 2. Horonaim, in Moab (cf Jr 48:34); or 3. Upper/Lower Beth Horon, two key cities 12 miles northwest of Jerusalem (cf Jos 10:10; 16:3, 5; 1 Macc 3:16; 7:39). Sanballat was the leading political opponent of Nehemiah (cf Neh 2:19; 4:1, 7; 6:1-2, 5, 12, 14; 13:28). He also held a position as the governor of Samaria (cf Neh 4:1-2).

<sup>157</sup> See details about the Hebrew names 'hY"biAj) and his son !n"âx'Ahy on page 233 paragraph one.

<sup>158</sup> Geshem is thought to have been in charge of north Arabian confederacy which covers northeast Egypt to north Arabia and southern Palestine (cf footnotes in NIV Study Bible 1995:688-689).

the part of the alleged enemies/foreigners is viewed in the text as an attempt to derail Yahweh's cause for his people-the *golah* community.

Meanwhile, Nehemiah unveils the plan to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls to the returned exiles (cf Neh 2:17-19). When their neighbours or alleged enemies heard the plan, they began to oppose the whole mission. What was their motive for their opposition? Grabbe (1998b:161) has suggested that, the fundamental motivation to this opposition was the exercise of political authority over the Judean region. Prior to Nehemiah's coming, the state of Samaria exercised some form of temporary authority over the affairs of the Judean region. But this situation was later discontinued (cf also Williamson 2004:11, 18, 33-35; Breneman 1993:25-26, 31; see Ezr 2:1; 5:14; Hg 1:1).

Tobiah, the junior colleague of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, probably received a temporary appointment as the governor of Judah (cf Williamson 2004:11, 18, 33-35; Breneman 1993:25-26, 31). This followed the disturbances recorded in Ezra 4. His temporary appointment may well explain why he had close ties to Jerusalem (cf Neh 13:4-9). But Tobiah's appointment may have come to an end when Nehemiah assumed office as the governor of the province of Judah. As a consequence, Nehemiah was a threat to the three prominent leaders (i.e. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem) with regard to the administration of the affairs of the Judean region. The mutual advantage of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem over the Judean region was lost when Nehemiah resumed work as governor of Judah (cf also Grabbe 1998b:161; Albertz 1994:526-527).

However, Nehemiah was convinced that the God of heaven would grant success to his servants who rebuilt the wall (cf Neh 2:20). But he made a statement from the last part of the verse which seems to have no prior reference. He argued that these alleged enemies (i.e. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem) had no share in Jerusalem or in any claim or historical right to Jerusalem. What share, claim or historical right does Nehemiah refer to? Is it the right to live, worship, do business, own property or to socialize in Jerusalem?

For Klein (1999:761), Nehemiah's statement here means "his opponents will have no political share in Jerusalem (cf 2 Sam 20:1; 1 Ki 12:16), no claim to exercise jurisdiction or citizenship there, and no right to participate in the worship at the Jerusalem Temple (cf Ezr 4:3)." Similarly, Blenkinsopp (1989:226-227) argues that Nehemiah's statement may be regarded as a declaration of political, judicial, economic, and religious independence on behalf of the Judean region. Nehemiah's motive was that, these foreigners had neither political association nor any legal rights to exercise jurisdiction or right to participate in the Jerusalem cult.

Therefore, Nehemiah's statement (cf Neh 2:20) on the rights of the so-called enemies suggests that they had no political control over the affairs of the Judean region; but also the religious right that might have allowed these supposed enemies access to Yahweh's cult in Jerusalem seemed to be nullified by Nehemiah (cf Neh 13:7-9). In the perspective of Nehemiah, those

who had the right to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem were only the returned exiles (cf Fensham 1982:169). Foreigners, from his perspective, had no right to participate in the cult of Yahweh. Nehemiah's viewpoint converged with the exclusive ideology of other leaders such as Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra and their associates discussed previously (cf Ezr 4:3).

As the work on reconstructing the wall progressed, the narrator from an exclusive theological standpoint, wasted no time in letting the reader know that foreigners constituted a major anti-Jewish force in their attempt to halt Yahweh's work (cf Neh 4:1-23 & 6:1-19). Nehemiah was not scared, rather he prayed to his God and organized his people to face this threat. Finally, the mission was accomplished. Foreigners were led to admit that the work was possible through the hand of God (cf Neh 6:16).

### **5.3.2 Religious and social reforms**

Nehemiah and the leaders of the *golah* community undertook extensive religious and social reforms as described from an exclusive theological standpoint. The following discussion will expose the tension between the two theological perspectives. The concept of 'Yahweh's people' underlies this contestation as depicted in what follows.

### 5.3.2.1 Confession of sins

The occasion for the confession of sins is narrated in Nehemiah 9:1-38. This story is portrayed from an exclusive theological point of view. Those who returned from exile had gathered in order to confess their sins in the process following the celebration of the feast of Booths. The text made it obvious that those who participated in the religious assembly had separated from foreigners (cf Neh 9:2). This incident logically excluded all people of foreign descent from participating in the religious assembly. Foreigners were objects of separation from in order to qualify to participate in the penitential assembly (cf Neh 9:2).

Why did the separation from foreigners become the criterion for the inclusion or exclusion in the penitential assembly? Williamson (1985:311) observes that the use of the word *zera* (seed) of Israel and the separation from *goyim* (foreigners) in Nehemiah 9:2 suggest an exclusive racial understanding of Israel's own identity. However, Clines (1984:190) and Keil and Delitzsch (1975b:236) are more sympathetic to Nehemiah and his group. They argue that their action was not marital separation. It was not only Israelites who were to be admitted to the assembly. Rather, it was a voluntarily renunciation of the connections with foreigners and of their practices. The congregation of the *golah* community read from the book of Moses (cf Neh 8:1-18) and were motivated to obey what Yahweh had prescribed in that law. Following from the desire to obey the law of Moses,

the community celebrated the feast of Booths. After this feast, the *golah* community convened the penitential assembly.

Concerning the feasts of Booths, the law of Moses (cf Dt 16:14) made provisions for foreigners, aliens, servants, and other nations who were living in Israel to participate in the celebrations. The law of Moses also allowed foreigners to participate in the celebration of the Passover and the feast of Weeks (cf Ex 12:17-20, 48-49; Nm 9:14). But the law of Moses was silent about the participation of foreigners in the penitential assembly. However, given the fact that the other three major feasts were permissible and accessible to foreigners, it may have been possible for foreigners to also participate in the penitential assembly (cf 1 Ki 8:41-43; 2 Chr 6:32-33).

The only exception to the above viewpoint is whether Ezra had a separate law book, which was substantially different from the current Pentateuch or not? However, the discussion on the law of Moses in chapter two already revealed the contrary. From that examination, it is most likely that the law of Moses mentioned in various parts of Ezra and Nehemiah was basically similar to the present Pentateuch. Therefore, the basis on which all foreigners were barred from participating in this penitential assembly is difficult to determine on the basis of the Mosaic law alone.

As a result, I will draw a conclusion about this penitential prohibition of foreigners (cf Neh 9:2). Ezra and Nehemiah seemed to have re-interpreted the supposed Mosaic law in a peculiar manner in order to support their



exclusive religious and social reforms. This had influenced their understanding of the concept of 'Yahweh's people' and other nations or foreigners. Foreigners, from the exclusive theological standpoint are not 'Yahweh's people'. Therefore, they could not be allowed to participate in the penitential assembly of the *golah* community who claimed to represent 'Yahweh's people' exclusively.

#### 5.3.2.2 Signing an agreement

The *golah* community moved from their confession of sins to signing a resolution which they had made at the end of their penitence (cf Neh 9:38-10:39). Those who had participated in signing the agreement and those who had subscribed or pledged to its prescriptions are reported to have separated themselves from the peoples of the land (cf Neh 10:28). The *golah* community now used the same criterion that was employed for participation in the penitential assembly (cf Neh 9:2) for the signing of agreement (cf Neh 10:28). Breneman (1993:246) argues that it was necessary for the new community to separate themselves from foreigners in order that they might maintain the distinctive beliefs and ethical principles of the community (cf Fensham 1982:238). The situation in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah called for this separation in order to secure the continuity and identity of the redeemed community.

However, Clines (1984:205) and Blenkinsopp (1989:314) indicated that this group was the proselytes who had separated themselves from the practices

of their gentile neighbours. They then took an oath in support of this agreement. They saw this incident as similar to the occasion in which certain gentiles, who had separated themselves from their gentile practices, were allowed to participate in the Passover festival (cf Ezr 6:21).

The emphasis of Nehemiah (10:28) is on the purity of those who pledged allegiance to the agreement. The author(s)/editor(s) seemed to be so much akin to describing his/her conviction that the purity of this new community depended heavily upon their ability to separate from the people of the land as far as possible. The consciousness of the *golah* community about their separate historical and racial identity also was expanded to include distinctive religious and social identity. Consequently, the community pledged to keep away from intermarriage and from violating the Sabbath (cf Neh 10:30-31). Each of these two commitments shall be treated separately from below.

#### 5.3.2.3 Law of Moses

The narrative of Nehemiah 13:1-9 concerns the reading of the law of Moses, presented from the exclusive theological vantage point. The first three verses in this narrative plot indicate that the returning exiles read from the law of Moses in order to draw conclusions for their religious and communal life. As soon as the book of Moses was read, the assembly learned that this law book prohibited the Ammonites and the Moabites from entering into the sacred assembly of the Israelites. The reason therefore, was clearly stated (cf Neh 13:2). Both tribes did not show hospitality to the Israelites but requested

Balaam to curse Israel. The prohibition appeared to be similar to the prohibition in Deuteronomy.<sup>159</sup>

The discussion concerning this Law book has already been carried out in chapter two. It will therefore not be repeated in this section. However, my investigation assumes that the book of Moses mentioned several times in Ezra and Nehemiah was similar to (or at least a substantial part of it was) the current Pentateuch. If this assumption is taken into consideration, the incident in Nehemiah 13:1-9 appears to be at odds at some points with the spirit of Deuteronomy 23:3-8 (cf Clines 1984:237-238). For example, after the *golah* community had read from Deuteronomy 23:3-8 (I suppose), they decided to exclude everyone of foreign descent from their sacred assembly. But the basis for this sweeping exclusion in Deuteronomy prescribes something different from the actions of the *golah* community.

First, Deuteronomy 23:3-8 indicates that those who were specifically prohibited from participating in a religious assembly of the Israelites were the Moabites and the Ammonites. But even concerning these two tribes/nations, their children after the tenth generation could participate in the Israelite assembly (cf Dt 23:3). Other ethnic tribes/nations or races were not

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<sup>159</sup> Dt 23:3-8: “<sup>3</sup>No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their *descendants*, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD, <sup>4</sup> because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. <sup>5</sup> “Nevertheless, the LORD your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the LORD your God loves you. <sup>6</sup> “You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days. <sup>7</sup> “You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land. <sup>8</sup> “The sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD.

specifically included in this prohibition. This fact suggests the possibility of admitting some other foreign nations if they embrace Yahweh as their God.

Second, two separate nations were specifically permitted to participate in the Israelite assembly (cf Dt 23:7-8). These included the Edomites and the Egyptians. No mention was made by the *golah* community that the same Mosaic Law made a provision for the Israelites to associate themselves with the Edomites and the Egyptians in their religious gatherings. The text of Nehemiah is silent about this inclusive aspect derived from the same deuteronomic law.

Therefore, the question is: what motivated the *golah* community to expand the deuteronomic law to apply it to all generations of foreigners in this incident? For example, in the passage, Tobiah (cf Neh13:4-5) though an Ammonite<sup>160</sup> and also the grandson of Eliashib (cf Neh 13:28) were flushed out on the basis of this prohibition. Consequently, a few things might be pointed out here.

- First, the context of Deuteronomy 23:3-8 suggests that it is possible for other nations to have fellowship with the Israelites in their religious assembly. It is also possible for the Ammonites and the Moabites who came after the tenth generation, to enter the assembly of the Israelites.

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<sup>160</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite (Neh 2:10), must have surpassed the tenth generation limit prescribed in Dt 23:3.

- Second, the Hebrew name  $\text{ʾ}hY"biA_j)$  means “My goodness is Yahweh”. This theophoric name suggests that Tobiah might have been a worshipper of Yahweh. His son also bears the name  $\text{!n"āx'Ah}_y$  which means “Yahweh is gracious”. His son got married to the daughter of Meshullam who participated in the group that reconstructed the walls of Jerusalem (cf Neh 3:4, 30; 6:18). Tobiah had a close relationship with Eliashib the Priest (cf Neh 13:4-7). He may have been a governor of Trans-Jordan. Grabbe (2000b:406) has rejected the view that Tobiah was an Ammonite. He suggested that Tobiah was a Jewish person who was probably a Persian official, although his family home was in the old area of Ammon (see also Boccaccini 2002:86).

In view of Tobiah’s allegiance to Yahweh and his people, it is expected that by all probability, he would have received a positive treatment from the hands of the *golah* community. As a matter of fact he had received a favorable treatment until Nehemiah resumed his duty as the governor of the Judean region for the second term (Neh 13:4-9). Then he was ill treated and thrown out.

But, on what basis did Nehemiah and the *golah* community completely exclude all foreigners (instead of Ammonites and Moabites) from their sacred assembly? Blenkinsopp (1989:351) argues that Nehemiah 13:1-3 is an editorial insertion that bears a liturgical resemblance of reading the scripture

in the temple and synagogue. The purpose was to provide a scriptural warrant for Nehemiah's following actions (cf Williamson 1985:385). Breneman (1993:268) cautions that this incident should not be viewed as racial exclusivism because foreigners could become part of Israel by conversion (cf Ezr 6:21 and Rt 1:16-17). Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine the exact reason(s) on which all foreigners were excluded from the *golah* community.

The deuteronomic passage, in my opinion, does not warrant such an extreme interpretation and application undertaken by Nehemiah and his fellow returnees. The conception of the *golah* community, as 'Yahweh's people' motivated the author(s)/editor(s) of this book to re-interpret the deuteronomic passage exclusively in order to support the religious reforms of Nehemiah (cf Myers 1965:207-208). However, it is important to note that not every person adhered to this rigid perspective with regard to the foreigners or other nations. For example, Eliashib, the priest and probably some of his associates had shared an inclusive theological viewpoint with regard to 'Yahweh's people' and other nations/foreigners. Thus, he provided a place at the temple premises for Tobiah, who was probably a Jew (cf Grabbe 2000b:406). At least he seemed to be a convert to Yahweh worship as portrayed by his' and his son's names (cf Neh 6:18; 13:4-9). But the exclusive reforms of Nehemiah saw him as an enemy to the *golah* community or at least as an outsider.

#### 5.3.2.4 Sabbath reforms

Nehemiah 13:15-22 (cf 10:31) depicts the reforms of Nehemiah concerning the Sabbath. The Sabbath reform conducted by Nehemiah was congruent with Yahweh's command to his people in the Pentateuch (cf Ex 20:8-11; 23:12; Dt 5:12-15). There, God had commanded the Israelites to keep the Sabbath day holy. They were to rest from their labour on that day. The Israelites had to observe the Sabbath law. It also applied to aliens, strangers and slaves who were in their midst.

Thus, the law of the Sabbath did not discriminate against foreigners, aliens or other nations within Israel. Both the Israelites and the foreigners were required to rest on that day. Therefore, the *golah* community and the aliens or foreigners needed this admonition to confront their lack of keeping the Sabbath. Nehemiah wanted neither the *golah* community nor the people of the land to keep on violating the Sabbath.

However, despite Nehemiah's interest for the Sabbath to be kept, he failed to suggest the alternative thing that should be done on the Sabbath instead of the usual business activities. It is expected that he could have invited the peoples of the land to come and worship Yahweh on the Sabbath. This would have kept them busy doing something good instead of doing business on that day. Thus, an invitation to worship Yahweh on the Sabbath would have naturally deterred both the *golah* community and the alleged foreigners from deviating from the Pentateuchal law. Nehemiah seemed to protect the *golah*

community from foreign influence. But he lost sight of the inclusive aspect of the Sabbath law.

### 5.3. 2.5 Marriage reforms

I will examine the case of intermarriage between the *golah* community and the alleged foreigners in Nehemiah (cf Neh 13:23-28; cf 10:30). Intermarriage problem was dealt with in Ezra 9:1-10:44. Nehemiah encountered a similar problem when he resumed duties as the governor of Judah. This issue is depicted from the exclusive theological point of view. Nehemiah took notice of the intermarriage between the returned exiles and the neighbouring peoples. Several problems ensued which had motivated Nehemiah's marriage reforms.

- Language problem

As a consequence of the intermarriages, many of the children produced from this relationship spoke foreign languages rather than the language of Judah (cf Neh 13:24). Nehemiah seemed to be worried that the language of Judah would suffer extinction if this trend continued. It is true that the language of a people contributes to the formation of their self and national identity (cf Williamson 1985:397; Blenkinsopp 1989:363). So, the loss of a people's language could be construed as a loss of their personal and national identity (cf Clines 1984:247; Kidner 1979:131). Apart from that, the Jewish children were expected to know the language in which the *torah* was written in order to



read it and to keep its rules, regulations and decrees for a faithful relationship with Yahweh (cf Klein 1999:849).

Fensham (1982:267) points out that since Hebrew was the language of the Yahweh cult, people with a different language could not be allowed to participate in Jewish religious life. Nehemiah's religious aspiration for the *golah* community was to become a wishful thinking, if the new generation did not know their own language. Therefore, the need to take drastic measures against intermarriages became apparent.

- Lesson from the past

Nehemiah was worried also about a repetition of what had happened to king Solomon from the past (cf Neh 13:26-27; Williamson 1985:399). He was an outstanding king in the history of Israel and endowed with wisdom. As a matter of fact, he was deeply loved by Yahweh. But, despite all these credentials, he was misled by his foreign wives into worshipping foreign gods. Thus, according to deuteronomic deuteronomistic tradition, he sinned against Yahweh, the God of Israel (cf 1 Ki 11:1-13).

One goal of studying history is to know the past, and then to shape or correct the present and also to prepare for the future. Similarly, Keto (2001:xi, 3-5) notes 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". A spiritual or religious component could be added to Keto's list of identities. This means that the past also helps people to know, to

form and to shape their religious and spiritual identity in order to plan for the future. Thus, Nehemiah was probably concerned that the *golah* community needed to learn from the experience of king Solomon. Otherwise, their spiritual or religious identity in the future was at stake.

- Leadership by example

The grandson of Eliashib, the high priest was involved in this same obscenity by intermarrying a daughter of Sanballat (cf Neh 13:28-30). Previously, Tobiah was also alleged to have married a daughter of Shecaniah while his son Jehohanan married the daughter of Meshullam (cf Neh 6:17-18). This state of affairs could explain why Tobiah had been given a space in the temple store rooms (cf Neh 13:4-5). But Grabbe (2000b:406) is convinced that Tobiah was not an Ammonite as claimed by the narrative of Nehemiah. He was rather a Jew. If Tobiah was an Ammonite, the action of Nehemiah could be justified in some way (cf Neh 13:7-9). But if he was not, the basis for the ill treatment of Tobiah is difficult to determine.

The behaviour of Eliashib's grandson, who married a daughter of Sanballat, was perceived by Nehemiah to be a bad example set by a member of a priestly family (cf Williamson 1985:399). It was a notorious defilement of the priestly order as well as of the covenant of priesthood (cf Lv 21:14). Nehemiah knew that, since priests were spiritual or religious leaders, what they said and did could affect the general populace positively or negatively. The behaviour of the grandson of Eliashib could set a negative precedent for

the *golah* community. It was considered as the highest form of religious apostasy (cf Fensham 1982:267).

Therefore, being hard pressed by all these problems, Nehemiah fiercely repudiated the Jews who had committed such an abhorrent thing by intermarrying with the peoples of the land such as Ashdodites, Ammonites and Moabites (cf Neh 13:25). He rebuked them, called curses on them, beat some of them and pulled out their hair (cf Ezr 9:3-4). He forced them to take an oath in God's name so that they could separate from their foreign partners (cf Ezr 10:3-5; 16-17). He pointed out that Solomon had failed because of such foreign marital relationships. The returning Jews were not greater than Solomon. As king Solomon had failed religiously (which was precipitated by inter-marriage: cf 1 Ki 11:1-8; Neh13:26-27), the *golah* community members who had married foreign women could fall in a similar manner.

I have treated the subject of intermarriage in chapters two (cf 2.10.1) and five (cf 5.2.2.2; Ezra 9:1-10:44). In chapter two, it was evident that certain scholars (cf Wolfendale 1974:143-144; Clines 1984:116-118; Klein 1999:732-733) are convinced that intermarriage prohibition in Ezra and Nehemiah was motivated by the concern to protect the monotheistic character of Judaism against the powerful syncretistic polytheism which was prevalent during the Persian period.

Similarly, Breneman (1993:52) asserted that 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 remains pure in doctrine, customs, and ethical norms (cf Fensham 1982:260). Ezra's and Nehemiah's actions seem to be radical, but the books of both Ezra and Nehemiah inform us how imperative it was in God's plan [according to their perspective(s)] that this covenant community continue to exist. Unchecked assimilation between the *golah* community and other people would have meant the discontinuation of the *golah* community. Thus, the survival of a people could have been part of the driving force behind this reform (Blenkinsopp 1989:363).

However, other scholars such as Williamson (1985:I-li)<sup>161</sup> disagree with the above opinion. Instead, he contended that the intermarriage prohibition was motivated by Jewish racial prejudice. Maccoby (1996:156-157) also disagrees with the above accusation on the ground that racism is based on racial superiority; supposedly, there is no trace in Israel's history which indicates that the Jews were a superior race.

My opinion is that 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 tipped the weight of this argument against Maccoby's conclusion (cf Smith 1996:556).

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<sup>161</sup> Cf also Maccoby (1996:156-157), though Maccoby himself shares a contrary viewpoint.

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 purity was part of the motivation for the prohibition of intermarriage by Ezra and Nehemiah. But in my opinion, the driving force behind these reforms was the conception of 'Yahweh's people' exclusively or primarily as the *golah* community. Hence, those who did not belong to the *golah* group inevitably could not be considered as appropriate marriage partners.

In chapter five (5.2.2.2), my investigation indicated that Ezra introduced divorce proceedings as one of the measures to deal with the problem of intermarriage. It seemed also that Deuteronomy 7:3 was the basis on which Ezra sustained his reforms. However, it is obvious that Ezra re-interpreted Deuteronomy 7:3 in a peculiar way in order to support his exclusive religious and social reforms. Otherwise, it is apparent from the context of Deuteronomy 7:3 that idolatry was the focus of the prohibition. Nowhere in the Pentateuch do we find an explicit rejection of intermarriage without having the worship of foreign gods as the main reason for that prohibition (cf Breneman 1993:149; Williamson 1985:130-131).

Similarly, Nehemiah seemed to be concerned about the temptation to worship other gods as king Solomon did. I therefore, assume that Nehemiah's interpretation reflects the spirit of the deuteronomic prohibition on

intermarriage. However, there is a twist in the measures which Nehemiah undertook to address this problem. The next paragraph explains this twist.

Nehemiah completely excludes any possibility that a foreign woman could embrace/worship Yahweh the God of Israel via the process of intermarriage. He portrayed a one-sided theological standpoint concerning intermarriage. According to Nehemiah, since intermarriage is discouraged by the Mosaic law and since Solomon the greatest king had sinned by worshipping other gods, deductively, every Israelite who had married foreign women could undoubtedly fall in a similar trap as king Solomon did. However, the stories of Ruth, the Moabitess, Zipporah the Midianite, Bathsheba the Hitite and Rahab the Canaanite, et cetera who served as good examples of the possibility of a genuine conversion to Yahweh cult through intermarriage elude Nehemiah during his religious and social reforms.

Therefore, what can be said for the aforementioned elusion and consequently for Nehemiah's abhorrent treatment of those who had intermarried with foreign nations? I have argued that the concept of Yahweh's people seemed to lay behind the mental process of Ezra, Nehemiah and their associates. Their conception was that the *golah* community were exclusively 'Yahweh's people'. Despite this exclusive religious self-identification, other people in Ezra and Nehemiah also conveyed the conception that Yahweh's people does not only refer to the *golah* community; rather, it refers to other people, nations or foreigners who embrace Yahweh as their God. Eliashib, the high

priest, and his associates represented this latter standpoint (cf Neh 13:4-5, 7, 23-28). Thus, these two perspectives lay behind the theological tension in Ezra and Nehemiah. The subject of intermarriage therefore, is one of the subject areas where this tension has surfaced.

As a subsidiary motivation for the outright prohibition of intermarriage, it is also possible that the prevalence of so many family lists in Ezra (cf 2:1-67; 8:1-14; 10:18-43) and in 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 seed/race' (cf Ezr 9:1-2) suggest that the *golah* community considered themselves as racially distinct from the rest of the other people. Hence, intermarriage between the *golah* community and the peoples of the land was inconceivable and could not be tolerated from the exclusive theological standpoint. This racial integration could contaminate the 'holy race/seed'. Consequently, it became very difficult to dismiss the accusation that racial purity was part of the motivation for the prohibition of intermarriage during the periods of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf Williamson 1985:I-li).

### **5.3.3 Conclusion**

This chapter reveals two conflicting theological perspectives in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the concept of Yahweh's people and concerning other nations, foreigners, aliens or the peoples of the land. Consequently, several subject matters have reflected this tension. This includes the reconstruction of the structural projects like the altar, temple, and

wall, as well as, the religious and social reforms conducted by Ezra, Nehemiah and their corporate returnees.

On the one hand, Ezra, Nehemiah and other returned exiles adopted an exclusive theological viewpoint on 'Yahweh's people' and on other nations, peoples of the land, foreigners and aliens.

On the other hand, a few people had resisted this outrageous exclusive ideology of Ezra, Nehemiah and their associates. Instead, such a viewpoint had adopted an inclusive theological standpoint on the same concepts. This resulted in a heightened theological controversy between the two parties on the issue.

Within the frame of reference of the former group, total separation from foreigners was one of the distinctive characteristics for the holiness of the early post-exilic Jewish community (cf Smith 1996:556). Those who are 'Yahweh's people' are the *golah* community. No person outside this understanding was to be acknowledged as part of 'Yahweh's people'. This exclusive theological viewpoint is the dominant perspective in the two books.

However, the inclusive theological perspective is more sympathetic with foreigners. This perspective grows from a few other returned exiles, certain Jews who had remained in the land during the exile and some other neighbouring peoples. The adherents of this viewpoint resisted the brutal reforms of Ezra-Nehemiah and other returned exiles (cf Ezr 10:15; Neh 6:17-19; 13:4-5, 7-8, 23-28). Rather, they had adopted an open posture towards



the alleged foreigners as shown by their social and religious integration. In this perspective, foreigners could be allowed to partner with the Jews in religious and social matters.

The sweeping exclusive reforms are allegedly based upon the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants.<sup>162</sup> But the investigation of both covenants and the Ezra-Nehemiah texts reveals the contrary. This exclusion portrays a partial understanding of the perspectives of the two covenants. The Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants made provisions for foreigners to associate with the Israelites in religious and social matters. These covenant provisions included:

- Yahweh's promise to be the God of the Patriarchs as well as the God of Israel;
- The notion of Abraham as the father of a multitude of nations;
- Circumcision;
- The blessing of other nations via Abraham and his descendants;
- Food provision;
- Sabbath keeping;
- Celebration of Passover, feasts of Weeks and Tabernacles;
- Equality of both the Israelites and the foreigners before the law of Yahweh;
- Intermarriage;
- Sacrificial offering; and
- Cities of refuge.

Therefore, this investigation confirms that the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra, Nehemiah re-interpreted certain passages from the Pentateuch ideologically in order to support the religious and social exclusive reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.

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<sup>162</sup> Cf Ezr 9:1-15; Neh 1:5-10; 9:7-25; Ex 2:24; 3:16-17; 6:2-9; Dt 1:8; 6:10-12; 10:12-22; 30:19-20.

#### 5.4 EXCURSUS: Terms associated with the *golah* community as ‘Yahweh’s people’

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah used various terms to refer to the *golah* community as ‘Yahweh’s people’ and vice versa. The people who did not go into exile were not regarded as ‘Yahweh’s people’. The following references therefore, strengthen the argument in this chapter that the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah re-interpreted certain passages to support the exclusive reforms. Consequently, several passages repeatedly refer implicitly or explicitly to the *golah* community as the people of Yahweh. Terms like אֱמָנָא [ / ^ M < + [ ; ; (‘his people’/‘your people’: cf Ezr 1:3; Neh 1:10; 9:32) have been used in this exclusive sense. The possessive pronouns ‘his/your’ refer to Yahweh, while the term ‘people’ refers to the *golah* community. The following references further illustrate this exclusive understanding of the *golah* community as ‘Yahweh’s people’.

- laeêr" f .yI yheäl { a / `hw"hy > (‘Yahweh, the God of Israel’: Ezr 1:3; 3:2; 4:1, 3; 5:1; 6:14, 21, 22; 7:6, 15; 8:35; 9:4, 15).
- Wnyte\_Aba ] yheäl { a / hw"ßhy > (‘Yahweh the God of our fathers’: Ezr 7:27).
- ~k, (yteboa] yheîl { a / hw"ßhyl i (to ‘Yahweh the God of your fathers’: Ezr 8:28; 10:11).
- `yh ; l { a / hw"Ühy > (‘Yahweh my God’: Ezr 7:28; 8:5, 6; Neh 2:8, 12, 18; 5:19; 6:14; 7:5; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).
- ~h, ßyhel { a / hw"±hy > (‘Yahweh their God’: Ezr 5:5; 7:16; Neh 9:3, 4; 12:45).
- ~k, \_yhel { aleŸ (toward ‘your God’: Ezr 4:2, 7:14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 25, 26; Neh 9:5).
- `wyh' l { a / hw"Ühy > (‘Yahweh his God’: Ezr 7:6, 9; Neh 13:26).
- Wnyhe\_ l { a / (‘our God’: Ezr 4:3; 8:17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 25, 30, 33; 9:8, 9, 10, 13; 10:2, 3, 14; Neh 4:4, 9; 5:9; 6:16; 9:32; 10:29, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 36, 39; 13:2, 4, 18, 27).
- •yhiAdb. [ ; AM†hi an"x.n:åa ] (‘we are his servants’: Ezr 5:11; Neh 2:20).
- ^†D>b. [ ; / ^yd<\_b' [ ] laePr" f .yI ynEïB . (‘your servant’/ ‘sons of Israel your servants’: Neh 1:6, 10, 11).