

Restoration or Desperation in Ezra and Nehemiah? Implications for Africa¹

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ABSTRACT

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah open with high hopes for the people of Judah (cf. Ezra 1-2; Neh 1-2). One would have hoped that the command to rebuild the temple and the city walls as well as to restore the lives and dignity of the Golah community would bring healing, peace, hope and stability to the exiles. Unfortunately, it was desperation, hopelessness and insecurity that befell them. There seems to have been two reasons for this. First, non-exiles/foreigners are portrayed as the one cause. Second, the privileged class within the restored community are portrayed as another cause. It is argued that Ezra and Nehemiah depict the experiences of the returnees as a paradox. On the one hand, they are restored to religious, political and economic freedom. On the other hand, they are threatened from within and from without, hence their desperation in the midst of restoration. Could it be that the freedom and democracy that Africa, particularly Nigeria and South Africa, longed for and obtained will result in a thwarted restoration?

A INTRODUCTION

The texts of Ezra and Nehemiah reveal the experiences of the returned exiles to be paradoxical. On the one hand, they hoped that their religious, political and social life would be refreshed or restored. There would be peace and security, unity and progress in the new community. Yahweh would once again dwell among his people (cf. Ps 126:1-6). On the other hand, these survivors were threatened from within and from without. The hope for peace and security, unity and progress as a product of freedom and restoration became a nightmare. The prophetic message that Yahweh would dwell among his people (the post-exilic community) seemed illusionary. In its stead they had to cope with insecurity, poverty, religious and racial tension, etcetera. Thus, the returnees experienced *desperation* in the midst of *restoration*.

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This paradox of restoration and desperation in Ezra and Nehemiah seems to echo or play out also in Africa including Nigeria and South Africa. When African nations began to shelve away the shackles of colonialism, apartheid and military regimes, they turned to democracy hoping for a united, progressive and secured Africa. Many nations in Africa had adopted democracy with high hopes that it would transform their lives for the better (cf. Monsma 2006:xi). Today, unfortunately, some African nations that have adopted freedom and democracy cannot count on a far-reaching peace, unity, progress or security in their respective lands as they had thought prior to the inception of democracy. The dreams about what freedom and democracy would offer are becoming a wishful thinking, given the spate of crime, wars, military coups, corruption and bad political and economic policies adopted and practised by these nations. As a result, the era of freedom and democracy has impoverished many Africans in essence rather than enhance their living conditions. One problem, among others, which is so troubling in some African contexts, is where a select few live in unimaginable affluence while the rest struggle in abject poverty. Will history repeat itself in Africa as it was in the post-exilic period? Is Africa another theatre for a thwarted restoration? What are the implications African nations can draw from the experience of the post-exilic Jewish community in the people's quest for freedom and democracy, peace and security, unity and progress?

B RESTORATION OR DESPERATION IN EZRA AND NEHEMIAH?

1 Ezra

a Introduction: Freedom for the exiles pronounced by King Cyrus

When King Cyrus claimed that he had received authority from Yahweh to rule the nations, he quickly pronounced freedom for the Jews in Babylonia (cf. Ezra 1:1-11; Isa 41:2, 25; 44:28-45:1, 13; Jer 25:11-12; 29:10; 51:9-11). The King's decision is reported to have been a divine conviction from the heart.² Cyrus appeared to have fulfilled Yahweh's promise as pronounced previously by the prophet Jeremiah (cf. Ezra 1:1; Jer 25:11-12; 27:22; 29:10; 51:1-12). The Jewish exiles had anticipated this good news for a period of plus minus seventy years. So, laughter broke out in the camps of the exiles when the news of freedom finally came (cf. Ps 126:1-3).

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 is doubted (cf. Ezra 1:1-4). Some scholars point to the inscription found on the Cyrus Cylinder to argue against the premise that Cyrus was moti-

² According to the Hebrew wisdom literature, the heart is the place where knowledge, wisdom, love and rationality dwell (cf. Prov 3:1, 5; 4:21, 23; 6:21; 7:3; 10:8; 22:17-18; 23:15).

vated by Yahweh to release the Jews (cf. Bright 2000:362, Throntveit 1992:14, Breneman 1993:67 and Klein 1999:678). The inscription on Cyrus' Cylinder names *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). It is also reasoned that King Cyrus had a political motive for freeing the captives. The king thought that, if the captives receive a certain level of religious and socio-political autonomy, the nations would be more loyal to his government (cf. also Albertz 2003:116). Therefore, it was not a divine motivation. This is why Cyrus freed all the captives. Not only were those from Judah set free, but also those from other nations.

My conviction is that the authenticity of this decree should not have become a bone of contention among scholars. As an African who believes in the divine ordering of events, I subscribe to the view of the biblical writer/editor that history is ordered by Yahweh and therefore its facts can be interpreted theologically among other ways (cf. Williamson 1985:9-10). From a theological standpoint, Cyrus' actions were done in order to fulfil the word of the prophet Jeremiah (cf. Jer 25:11-12; 27:22; 29:10; 51:1-12). This means, Yahweh's purposes for raising Cyrus were:

- to destroy Babylon
- to enable the exiles to return home and
- to assure that the temple might be rebuilt in Jerusalem.

These purposes were, therefore, fulfilled in the following manner:

- First, Babylon was captured and destroyed in 539 BC.
- Second, the exiles returned to Jerusalem as suggested by this decree.
- Third, the temple was also rebuilt, though, not without some difficulty, as indicated by the same decree, and
- Fourth, the reconstruction of the city and its walls took place without any stiff resistance from the Persian administration (except from the Trans-Euphrates regional government. Cf. Ezra 4:1-24; 6:13-14; Neh 4:1-23; 6:1-19).

Therefore, Cyrus, from the point of view of the author(s)/editor(s), was subservient to Yahweh's purposes for his exiled people. The successes recorded by the returned exiles confirm the content of the decrees of Cyrus and that of the subsequent Persian kings to be essentially true as presented in Ezra. This may also explain why Cyrus reversed the action of his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar, when he removed all the temple articles (belonging to the house of Yahweh), from the Babylonian temple and handed them over to Sheshbazzar³ the

³ A Babylonian name, *sassu-aba-usur* meaning 'May Shamash [the sun god] protect the father [of this child]' (cf. Albertz 2003:120; Williamson 1985:5 and Klein 1999:679), or 'Sin protects the son' (cf. Brockington 1969:50-51). Sheshbazzar in my

prince of Judah. Every item was counted, so that nothing was diverted to another place (cf. Ezra 1:7-11). The first group of exiles left Babylon and returned home to Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 2:1-70).

This state of affairs stimulated a sense of hope among the returnees that Yahweh had not abandoned Israel completely. Rather, they had remained his people and he was still their God. In addition, the survivors expected the restoration of their religious, social and political institutions. But as we may observe in what follows, this restored community faced unimaginable internal and external problems that resulted in desperation in the midst of restoration. Hence, there is an interplay between restoration and desperation in Ezra and Nehemiah. This interplay is visible through the following events:

b Restoration of the altar

When the first batch of exiles returned to Judah, they began work on rebuilding the altar amidst fears of the ‘peoples of the land’⁴ (מַעֲבְדֵי הָאֲרָצוֹת cf. Ezra 3:1-3). The rebuilding of the altar was the first significant accomplishment because of the religious importance the altar had occupied in Israel’s relationship with Yahweh (cf. Alexander 2002:216-224). The altar was a place where all kinds of sacrifice were offered to renew Israel’s relationship with their God and with one another. Yahweh could forgive their sins through their sacrificial offerings. Thanksgiving and fellowship offerings were presented to Yahweh on the altar as part of the enhancing of their relationship with their God and among themselves (Kurtz 1998:51).

Apparently, the work was carried out amidst fears for the people around the survivors. But there is no hint from Ezra 3:1-6 as to what these ‘peoples of the land’ might have done to justify the fear entertained by the returned exiles. Could it be that the returnees were not welcomed by those who were living in the land during the exile? Or could it be that the new community felt psychologically uncomfortable having other people around them who did not share the

opinion is the same as Zerubabel. Hebrew *zerubabel* or Akkadian *zer-babili* means ‘offspring of [born in] Babylon’ (cf. Albertz 2003:120; Meyers 1987:1088; McKenzie 1976:952).

⁴ Who are these ‘people of the land’? The people of the land could have been Judah’s neighbours such as Edomites and other foreigners mentioned in Ezra 4:9-10 (cf. Klein 1999:691; Blenkinsopp 1989:98). It is also suggested that the 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). The role of the people of the land during the reconstruction of the altar was basically not appreciated by the returned exiles. The reason for this is that ‘the peoples of the land’ constituted an object of fear to those who were reconstructing the altar (cf. 1 Esd 5:49-50).

experience of having been in exile? My feeling is that this incident illustrates the interplay between restoration and desperation purposefully depicted by the author/editor of Ezra and Nehemiah. It seems to me that this author(s) juxtaposes the Old Testament eschatological dualism. On the one hand, there is hope for peace and security, unity and progress. On the other hand, there is a sense of insecurity, hopelessness and lack of social and religious cohesion. Thus, the returnees were happy to return to their home land but were not happy to live in this same land given the conditions they had to endure. Notwithstanding, the work on the altar was eventually completed.

c Rebuilding of the temple

The work on the second temple is reported in Ezra 3:7-6:22. The temple was a very special institution in the religious and socio-cultural life of Israel. It was the dwelling place of Yahweh. Yahweh dwelled in the temple among his people in Jerusalem. The absence of the temple in Israel meant that Yahweh was absent from his people. In my opinion, Israel could enjoy fellowship with God in the temple to symbolise a return to Eden where Adam and Eve had mutual fellowship with Yahweh. In view of this significance, the *Golah* community was highly energized for the work. They envisaged the glory that Yahweh would bring to his temple when it was completed. They also imagined how their religious activities would be revived when the temple was finally completed.

But when the Jewish survivors commenced work on rebuilding the temple, they encountered opposition from various enemies, individuals, groups, kings, and/or foreigners. Two chapters from Ezra are dedicated to the report concerning this opposition (cf. Ezra 4:1-5:17). This opposition grew so strong that work on the temple had to be delayed. After some time, the survivors resumed the work and completed it at the orders of King Darius (cf. Ezra 6:14-15).

Despite the alleged opposition on the part of foreigners, some of them contributed immensely to the reconstruction of the temple (cf. Ezra 3:7; 6:8, 13-14). One example is the people of Tyre and Sidon. This contribution on the part of foreigners to the rebuilding process suggests that foreigners were not completely predisposed to destabilizing the work on the temple as presupposed by the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah. Rather, they were opposed to being excluded from participating in the reconstruction work.

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 harshly with Israel and other nations. But Ezra 3:7 reports a different picture concerning the same people of Tyre and Sidon. They are said to have contributed positively to this work by supplying logs of wood from Lebanon (cf. 1 Kgs 5:18; 1 Chr 22:2, 4, 15; 2 Chr 2:8-18). Even the returned exiles welcomed

the participation of these Tyrians and the Sidonians. They provided food, drink and oil for them (cf. 3:7b). It is rather strange that when some of these surrounding people (the so-called enemies, cf. Ezra 4:1-3) offered to assist in the same project, their request was turned down (cf. Ezra 4:2-3).

In my opinion, the reasons for this rejection of the offer to assist in rebuilding the temple are not convincing.⁵ The returnees seemed to say that there was no common ground between them and the people that offered to assist. This is not a compelling reason because what specific common ground did this *Golah* community was looking for? The community did not specify the criteria that would qualify the people in the land to assist in the projects. They had forgotten that the Tyrians and the Sidonians assisted Solomon in building the first temple just as they assisted them. Another reason the returnees gave was that the orders of King Cyrus to rebuild the temple did not include other people. But King Cyrus appeared to have supported the work with his orders and state finances, so, how would he have said that other people should not help in rebuilding the temple? Despite this claim that Cyrus' orders did not provide room for other people to help with the work of rebuilding, it turned out that the work was later completed at the orders of another foreign king – Darius (cf. Ezra 6:14-15). Therefore, it seems to me that in this instance too, the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra are attempting to depict the interplay between restoration and desperation concerning the experiences of the returned exiles.

d Survivors celebrated the Passover

The returned exiles celebrated the Passover not only with their corporate Israelite returnees, but also with other gentiles, who had separated themselves from the practices of their gentile neighbours (Ezra 6:19-22; cf. Ezra 6:21⁶; Williamson 1985:85; Klein 1999:713). The Passover event was celebrated to recall Israel's redemption from Egypt. Its celebration during the post-exilic period recalls a similar significance. The *Golah* community was redeemed from the Babylonian captivity by Yahweh. So, the people of Yahweh once again celebrated this event to mark their redemption or freedom from exile.

Some scholars (Breneman 1993:121; Keil & Delitzsch 1975:92) believe 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, others (Klein 1999:713; Wil-

⁵ '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"'. (Ezra 4:3, New American Standard Bible).

⁶ Ezra 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*.' (New American Standard Bible).

liamson 1985:85) share the view that the people were gentiles rather than Jews (cf. also Blenkinsopp 1989:132-133; Myers 1965:54). This latter view is supported by two passages from the Pentateuch (cf. Ex 12:43-49 & Num 9:14; cf. Klein 1999:713) where foreigners were allowed to participate in the Passover if they were circumcised.

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 episodes though, but in this particular passage, those who converted to the Yahweh-cult, found an open door in Israel as did Rahab and Ruth. 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. The incident points to a welcoming attitude of the restored community. Here, the community had extended a hand of welcome to the peoples of the land instead of being in tension with them.

e Intermarriage and divorce

Ezra 9-10 reveals clearly the interplay between restoration and desperation. A report had reached Ezra that some people from the *Golah* community had intermarried with the peoples of the land. Ezra felt heartbroken about this action of the returnees. In view of this, an emergency assembly was convened. It was resolved that every person who had married a foreign woman should divorce that woman together with her children. Most people accepted the plan to divorce the so-called foreign women (Ezra 10:10-15). Only a handful of people did not accept the proposal (Keil & Delitzsch 1975:131; Allen 2003: 80). These were more sympathetic towards the alleged foreigners than the majority of the returnees who accepted the divorce proposal. But it is unfortunate that those who rejected the above divorce proceedings were ignored (cf. Ezra 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. Ezra 10:18-44).

This incident reveals the interplay between restoration and desperation. The returnees who had married these women seemed to have been living comfortably with their families but suddenly the intrusion of a religious reformer in the person of Ezra subverted their peaceful family life into divorce and desperation. Would the families who divorced their wives and children cope with the reality of starting another family all over again? Could the children understand the rationality behind this painful separation? These questions are not answered by the text. But yes, this is how the author(s) of the text of Ezra and Nehemiah pitches restoration against desperation as the experiences of the exiles.

2 Nehemiah

a King Artaxerxes permits Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem.

In the first chapter of the book, Nehemiah received a disturbing report concerning the returned exiles and the city of Jerusalem (cf. Ant 11:159-163⁷). He is deeply moved by the plight of those who had returned from exile to Jerusalem. The story focused on describing the deplorable plight of the *Golah* community and the city of Jerusalem (cf. Fensham 1982:151). Nehemiah, therefore, plans to rebuild the city walls in order to ease the plight and security situation of the people who had returned from exile to Jerusalem (cf. Neh 2:5). He is determined to restore the dignity of the *Golah* community from shame and disgrace to honour and pride (cf. Neh 2:17). He sought the permission of king Artaxerxes and it was granted. The passage henceforth describes the interplay between restoration and desperation as Nehemiah commences administrative and construction work in Jerusalem.

b Work on the city wall

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he inspected the walls of the city. He did this in order to know the condition of the walls and what needed to be done in order to restore the city walls. Nehemiah summoned the people and urged them to resolve to work on rebuilding the walls. The wall of the city was important, because it protected the survivors against their enemies (Ezra 9:9). The Jews were more secure in carrying out their religious and social activities in the city without any harassment from their enemies. The wall also separated the Jews from their gentile neighbours and their unholy practices.

Meanwhile, when Nehemiah surveyed the condition of the city walls, he unveiled 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 offered to assist the returnees but their request was turned down. As a result, those who offered to assist in reconstructing the walls began a sustained protest. What was the motive for this protestation? It is suggested that the fundamental motivation to this opposition was the exercise of political authority over the Judean region (Grabbe 1998:161). 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 Ezra 2:1; 5:14; Hag 1:1).

Consequently, it is pointed out that 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 tempo-

⁷ Josephus' Works: Antiquities.

rary appointment may well explain why he had close ties with 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 (Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem) with regard to the administration of the affairs of the Judean region. The mutual advantage of the three prominent leaders over the Judean region was lost when Nehemiah resumed work as governor of Judah (cf. also Grabbe 1998b:161; Albertz 1994:526-527).

By implication, the so-called enemies had no political control over the affairs of the Judean region; but also the religious right that might have allowed these alleged 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 (cf. Ezra 4:3).

In view of the above, as the work on the wall progresses, foreigners constituted a major threat against the returnees in order to halt Yahweh's work (cf. Neh 4:1-23 & 6:1-19). This incident points vividly to the premise that Ezra and Nehemiah depict the experiences of the survivors as a paradox, pitching restoration against desperation. Nevertheless, the mission was accomplished.

c Confession of sins

The occasion for the confession of sins is narrated in Nehemiah 9:1-38. Those who returned from exile had gathered in order to confess their sins following the celebration of the feast of Booths. The text makes 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 separated from the community in order to qualify the survivors to participate in the penitential assembly (cf. Neh 9:2).

The law of Moses (cf. Deut 16:14) made provision for foreigners, aliens, servants, and other nations who were living in Israel to participate in the celebration of the feast of Booths. 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; Num 9:14). But the law 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 Kgs 8:41-43; 2 Chr 6:32-33). However, it is not clear why foreigners were excluded from this assembly. Could it be that the author(s)/editor(s) wanted to

depict the interplay between restoration and desperation in Ezra and Nehemiah as part of the experiences of the returned exiles? In other words, could it be that the author(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah continuously wanted to pitch the returned exiles against their neighbours so as to strengthen the motif of restoration and desperation?

d 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 the agreement (cf. Neh 10:28). Was it necessary for the new community to separate themselves from foreigners in order that they might maintain their distinctive beliefs and ethical principles (Breneman 1993:246; cf. Fensham 1982:238)? Did the situation in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah call for this separation in order to secure the continuity and identity of the redeemed community?⁸

My opinion is that the emphasis of Nehemiah 10:28 is on the purity of those who pledged allegiance to the agreement. The author(s)/editor(s) seem to be intent on describing their 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 a distinctive religious and social identity. Consequently, the community pledged to keep away from intermarriage and from violating the Sabbath (cf. Neh 10:30-31). The story heightens the interplay between restoration and desperation. The perceived foreigners are portrayed as the source of desperation; therefore, if the new community could separate from the enemies/foreigners, they could realize and enjoy their restoration in full measure.

e Law of Moses

Nehemiah 13:1-9 also depicts the interplay between restoration and desperation. The returned 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

⁸ Some scholars think that this group was the proselytes who had separated themselves from the practices of their gentile neighbours (Clines 1984:205 & Blenkinsopp 1989:314). 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. Ezra 6:21).

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 for that was clearly stated (cf. Neh 13:2). Both nations did not show hospitality to the Israelites but requested Balaam to curse Israel. So, this assembly adopted a divisive approach as an appropriation of the law of Moses. The law of Moses here appears to be the prohibition in Deuteronomy.⁹

But the Deuteronomic passage, in my opinion, does not warrant such an extreme interpretation and application as that 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). It is also important to note that not every person adhered to this rigid perspective with regard to foreigners or other nations. For example, Eliashib, the priest, and probably some of his associates had shared an inclusive viewpoint with regard to foreigners. Thus, he provided a place on the temple premises for Tobiah, who was probably a Jew (cf. Grabbe 2000:406). Tobiah, at least, 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 Nehemiah saw him as an enemy to the *Golah* community or at least as an outsider.

Finally, this story boils down to the premise that the author(s)/editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah pitched restoration against desperation as the experiences of the returned exiles. Nehemiah worked as an agent of restoration while the perceived foreigners worked as agents of desperation.

f Sabbath reforms

Nehemiah 13:15-22 (cf. 10:31) depicts the reforms concerning the Sabbath. The Sabbath reform conducted by Nehemiah was congruent with Yahweh's command to his people in the Pentateuch (cf. Exod 20:8-11; 23:12; Deut 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

⁹ Deut 23:3-8: '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, ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days. ⁷ 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. ⁸ The sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD.'

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 continue to violate the Sabbath.

However, despite Nehemiah's zeal for the Sabbath to be kept, he failed to suggest the alternative thing that could have been 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 violating 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. The Sabbath reform also reveals the interplay between restoration and desperation. On the one hand, Israel had a second chance to worship Yahweh on the Sabbath. On the other hand, the alleged foreigners caused the returnees to move away from Sabbath observance, hence their desperation in the midst of restoration.

g Internal crisis

The story in Nehemiah 5 reveals an internal crisis within the returned community itself. Here, the problem that brought about desperation is not the result of an external factor; rather its cause lay within the in-group itself. The text reveals that inasmuch as the new community was returning home with high hopes for a better life, the case was different for many families. It was desperation instead of restoration. This was caused by the corporate returnees. The affected families complained publicly to Nehemiah the governor. Their grievances were that:

- Certain members of the returnees had large families but could not afford enough grain to feed their respective families as a result of the inhumane attitude of their native brothers (5:2);
- That the rich/privileged class had compelled other families to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and homes in order to get grain during famine (5:3);
- That some families had to take high interest loans from their rich brothers in order to pay the king's taxes on their fields and vineyards (5:4); and

- That a number of families had to subject their sons and daughters to slave labour in order to obtain food for their families (5:5).

This state of affairs brought about so much pain that the poor families took their grievances to the streets. The text seems to suggest that there was a public outcry greater than has ever been witnessed before. Nehemiah heard this outcry and felt very much disturbed. He summoned the nobles and state officials to a peace deal assembly. He laid the blame upon the nobles and the state officials for exacting usury from their fellow Jews. He then ordered that the nobles and state officials should give fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses back to their poor brothers. The nobles and state officials accepted Nehemiah's proposal. This incident depicts the interplay between restoration and desperation concerning the Jewish returnees.

The above enumerated incidents reveal a sustained paradox that exists in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the experiences of the returned exiles. Should their experiences simply be termed as a thwarted restoration or interplay between restoration and desperation?

C IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA

1 Postscript

From the examination of the experiences of the returned exiles in Ezra and Nehemiah, it is observed that the author(s)/editor(s) portrayed an interplay between restoration and desperation. The books reveal that even though the new community had hoped for peace and security, unity and progress, the reality was insecurity, poverty and religious/racial tension, hence their desperation in the midst of restoration.

This above paradox of restoration and desperation in Ezra and Nehemiah seems to be echoed or played out in Africa in countries including Nigeria and South Africa. Nigeria received its independence in 1960. Since then, Nigeria has suffered unimaginable political, religious and ethnic disturbances. This has created an atmosphere of insecurity, poverty and religious/ethnic tensions in the country similar to the post-exilic Judean experience. The dreams about what freedom and democracy would offer are yet to be fulfilled. The tension between Muslim and Christian religious groups has brought untold hardships to thousands, if not millions, of Nigerians. The fabric of the Nigerian social cohesion has been weakened in many respects due to this sustained conflict.

Similarly, when apartheid was ousted in South Africa, the world at large and the South African people in particular hailed and celebrated this development. The hope was that freedom, unity, peace, security and progress would be experienced in the nation. But twelve to thirteen years into this democratic South Africa, there are stories and happenings that stand in contrast to what the nation

had anticipated. There are traces of insecurity/crime, poverty, religious and racial tension, et cetera, as it was in the post-exilic Jewish community. Thus, the people of South Africa seem to be going through a similar experience of interplay between restoration and desperation.

Furthermore, other African countries are not devoid of this interplay between restoration and desperation. The images of the atrocities that have happened and are still happening in certain African countries such as Liberia, Siera-Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Sudan and Zimbabwe – just to mention a few – are still fresh in our memories.¹⁰ Is Africa simply another theatre for a thwarted restoration? What are the implications that African nations can draw from the experiences of the post-exilic Jewish community in their quest for freedom and democracy, peace and security, unity and progress?

2 Suggestion

Reality presses upon the African people that continuing dialogue among the various social, religious, political and ethnic/racial groups must be adopted and sustained in order to address the issues affecting the fabric of the African society. This means:

- Dialogue within and between the academia;
- Dialogue within and between Christian and other religious affiliations;
- Dialogue within and between ethnic and racial groups; and
- Political and economic dialogue within and between individuals and nations.

The Jewish post-exilic community appeared to have adopted an exclusivist stance in dealing with the problems that faced the community. They thought that by excluding the non-exiles and the peoples of the land from their religious, social, cultural and political assemblies would enhance their security, peace, unity and progress. But this approach did not help matters.

Therefore, African people must not make a similar mistake by excluding relevant groups from their circles on the basis of their perceived differences. Rather, we need to adopt a continuous dialogue between the various segments/groups in Africa concerning issues affecting our common and individual good. Conscious exclusion of others in the scheme of important issues will not help matters; rather adopting a continuous dialogue within and between various groups in Africa is the first step towards sustaining our restoration instead of desperation.

¹⁰ cf. Adogame 2004:329-332; Sharkey 2004:416; Cookson 2003:3; Shaw 2003:212; Khadiagala 2002:463; World Bank 2002:12 and Kumar 2001:1.

D CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah opened with high hopes for the people of Judah as they heard the news of their freedom (cf. Ezra 1-2; Neh 1-2). They had hoped that the command to rebuild the temple and the city walls as well as to restore their lives and dignity would bring healing, peace, hope and stability. Unfortunately, it was desperation, hopelessness and insecurity. Thus, I argue that Ezra and Nehemiah depict the experiences of the returnees as a paradox. On the one hand, they were restored to their religious, political and economic freedom. On the other hand, they were threatened from within and from without, hence their desperation instead of restoration.

In view of the above, I pointed out certain similarities between the post-exilic situation and the African context. I stressed the fact that African nations had longed for freedom and democracy as the Jewish exiles did but having obtained it, are facing a thwarted restoration. I therefore suggest that continuing dialogue among the various social, religious, political and ethnic/racial groups must be adopted and sustained in order to address the issues affecting the fabric of the African society. This means that deliberate exclusion of some people from the scheme of important affairs, as it was in the early post-exilic community, will not help matters; rather adopting a continuous and peaceful dialogue within and between various groups in Africa is the first step towards attaining restoration instead of desperation.

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