

CHAPTER 5

SYNTHESIS

5. 1 SUMMARY

This research intended to accomplish several objectives. First, it was aimed at revealing the nature of the relationship between the early post-exilic Jewish community and foreigners in Ezra and Nehemiah. The specific areas of this relationship include the religious life and communal living of the early post-exilic Jewish community.

In view of the above, this investigation reveals that the relationship between the newly returned exiles and foreigners in Ezra-Nehemiah was both exclusive and inclusive. On the one hand, Ezra and Nehemiah and some of the returning exiles held the perspective that all foreigners¹ should be excluded from the religious life and communal living of the new Israelite community (the *Golah* community)².

On the other hand, there is an inclusive perspective which held that foreigners (including non-exile Jews) should be included in the religious and communal

¹ Those who are not Israelites by descents as well as the Jews who had not gone to exile appeared to be both classified as outsiders by the returning exiles.

² Ezr 4:3; 6:6-7; 9:1-10:44; Neh 2:20; 9:2; 10:28-31; 13:1-30.

life of the returning exiles³. Because of these dual perspectives on the supposed foreigners in Ezra and Nehemiah, there is tension in the books concerning the legitimate place of foreigners in the early post-exilic Jewish period.

Second, the research aimed at revealing the perspective of Abrahamic covenant concerning foreigners. The specific concern here was to demonstrate the actual perspective of the Abrahamic covenant concerning foreigners or non-Israelites. Through the examination of the Abrahamic covenant stipulations and certain passages from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History, the investigation reveals that there is appropriate provision in the Abrahamic covenant, the Pentateuch as well as in the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History for foreigners to relate with the Israelites in religious life and communal living⁴.

In other words, the Abrahamic covenant, the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History outlined specifically how foreigners could be appropriated in the religious life and communal living of the

³ Ezr 1:1-11; 3:7; 6:19-22; 7:11-28; 10:15; Neh 2:6-9; 13:4-6, 23-24, 28a.

⁴ Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 17:12-13, 23-27; Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Dt 24:19-21; 14:28-29; 26:12-15; Ex 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7; Nm 15:14-15; Ex 20:8-11; 23:12; Dt 5:12-15; 1 Ki 8:41-43; 2 Chr 6:32-33; Ex 12:48-49; Nm 9:14; Gn 38:6-30; cf. Mt 1:3; Nm 12:1-2; Rt 1:16-17; 4:13-22; cf. Mt 1:5b; Jos 6:22-23; cf. Mt 1:5a; 2 Sm 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25; cf. Mt 1:6b.

Israelites. Some of these areas where foreigners may be incorporated in the religious life and communal living of the Israelites were as follows:

Firstly, Abraham and his seed were to be a channel of God's blessing toward other nations (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Secondly, foreigners could be circumcised (Gn 17:12-13, 23-27). Thirdly, food could be provided for aliens and sojourners (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Dt 24:19-21; 14:28-29; 26:12-15; Ex 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7). Fourthly, foreigners could offer sacrifices in the Temple (Nm 15:14-15). Fifthly, foreigners in the midst of the Israelites could keep the Sabbath (Ex 20:8-11; 23:12; Dt 5:12-15). Sixthly, foreigners may worship and pray in the temple (1 Ki 8:41-43; 2 Chr 6:32-33). Seventhly, aliens may celebrate the Passover with the Israelites (Ex 12:48-49; Nm 9:14). Eighthly, foreigners and native-born Israelites were equal before the Law of Yahweh (Ex 12:49; Nm 9:14; 15:13-16, 29-30) and lastly, foreigners may intermarry with the Israelites if they could abandon other gods and embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel (e.g. Tamar-Gn 38:6-30; cf. Mt 1:3, Moses-Nm 12:1-2, Ruth-Rt 1:16-17; 4:13-22; cf. Mt 1:5b, Rahab-Jos 6:22-23; cf. Mt 1:5a and Bathsheba-2 Sm 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25; cf. Mt 1:6b).

Third, the study aimed at revealing whether Ezra-Nehemiah exhibit racial prejudice or at least exclusivity in their relation to non-exiles or foreigners (cf. Williamson 1987:83). This research shows that Ezra and Nehemiah have

certain objectives concerning the composition and identity of the returning exiles. Ezra and Nehemiah appeared to have shared a common conviction that the holiness of the returning exiles depended heavily upon their ability to distance themselves from the rest of the other people⁵. As a consequence, the principle of complete separation from the rest of the other people was employed as a means of keeping the newly returned exiles holy. Ezra and Nehemiah seemed to appeal to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as the basis on which these exclusive reforms were founded.

On the contrary, a close reading of some of the covenant texts on which Ezra and Nehemiah's exclusive reforms were based revealed a different viewpoint. Few illustrations can be made here. First, the basis on which intermarriage was dissolved from Ezra and Nehemiah (e.g. Ezr 9-10; Neh 13:1-3) cannot be substantiated on the basis of Deuteronomy 7:1-6. The issue in this Deuteronomy passage concern idolatry and religious syncretism (Dt 5:7-10; Ex 20:3-6). The concern for the prohibition of intermarriage in Deuteronomy is therefore not based on racial differences as Ezra and Nehemiah appeared to presuppose. That is, Ezra and Nehemiah ought not to have used the Deuteronomy passage for their intermarriage reforms because Deuteronomy points to idolatry as its focus, not racial difference.

⁵ Cf. Ezr 4:3; 6:6-7; 9:1-10:44; Neh 2:20; 9:2; 10:28-31; 13:1-30.

Second, the prohibition of the Ammonites and the Moabites from participating in the religious assemblies of the Israelites does not necessary imply the exclusion of all other foreigners as the text of Ezra and Nehemiah seem to portray (Neh 13:1-3; cf. Dt 23:1-8)⁶. More pointedly, king Solomon made it clear in his prayer that foreigners may come and pray to Yahweh in the temple (1 Ki 8:41-43; 2 Chr 6:32-33). In view of these evidences, I argued that Ezra and Nehemiah's appeal to the covenant as the basis for their exclusive reforms is questionable. Certainly, the Israelites were obliged to be holy. However, their holiness was not intended to be used as a means to exclude other nations or people who may want to embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel. It was meant that Israel would reveal the holiness, will and love of Yahweh through their holiness, as they live and walk among other nations⁷. The Abrahamic covenant reiterated also that Abraham and his descendants were to be a channel through which other nations may receive God's blessing (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14)⁸. Obviously, other nations may not receive

⁶ Dt 23:1-8 forbade the Ammonites and the Moabites from entering in the religious assemblies of the Israelites for a specific reason. The two nations failed to show hospitality to the Israelites while they were on their way to the Promised Land. It is evident from the text that other nations also (for example Edomites and Egyptians) could be welcomed in the religious assembly of the Israelites. God loves all people including aliens or foreigners (Dt 10:18). In addition, foreigners are required to sacrifice to Yahweh just as the Israelites were (Nm 15:13-16).

⁷ Gn 18:18-19; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14; Dt 10:12-22; cf. Ross (1988:260) and Walton & Matthews (1997:36-37).

⁸ There have been enormous discussions on the nature of the blessing in chapter three of this thesis. As such, what I would like to stress here is not the blessing itself. The point I want to highlight now is the necessity of other nations relating to Abraham and his seed. The purpose of this relationship is to receive God's blessing.

God's blessing if they are banned from relating with Abraham and his descendants on a permanent basis.

Therefore, this research agrees with the working hypothesis that, firstly, the Abrahamic covenant⁹ and certain passages from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history provide a framework for a religious and communal relationship between the Israelites/Jews and foreigners (other nations). Secondly, that, the author(s) or editor(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah re-interpreted certain passages from the Pentateuch in a peculiar way to support the exclusive religious and social reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.

5. 2 FINAL REMARKS

In conclusion, my research revealed something that appeared to be one among the greatest mistakes that Ezra, Nehemiah and some of the returning exiles or the post-exilic community had made. The mistake was their attempt to localize Yahweh, the God of Israel. It was evident from the Ezra and Nehemiah narratives that Yahweh was understood by this dominant perspective as belonging to the returning exiles alone. This exclusive perspective viewed non-exiles and virtually all other people as unholy races

⁹ Abrahamic covenant promises that relate to foreigners include: Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

and therefore unfit to worship Yahweh and to mix with the supposed people of Yahweh - the returning exiles.

However, the Abrahamic covenant, the Pentateuch, the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History and certain events in Ezra and Nehemiah suggested that there are appropriate ways for other people, nations and races including the exiles of Israel to embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel. The Abrahamic covenant promise of been a channel of blessing to all nations, the circumcision, the food provision, the Sabbath-keeping, the Passover celebration, the offering of sacrifices, the equality of the native-born Israelite and the alien before the Law, the intermarriages between foreigners and Israelites and the provision for foreigners to pray in the temple, et cetera, are some of the means through which foreigners or other nations may be appropriated into Israel and may embrace Yahweh as their God.

Yahweh illustrated the above fact in many ways through Israel's history. Yahweh used foreign kings, namely, Cyrus, Artaxerxes and Darius to accomplish His divine purposes as observed from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This stresses the point that Yahweh can not be localized in the *Golah* or the returning exile community. He can be embraced and worshipped by all nations. Israel and/or the returning exiles do not have an exclusive right to know and serve Yahweh as presupposed by Ezra, Nehemiah and other

returning exiles or post-exilic community. This inclusive perspective appeared to have been suppressed in Ezra and Nehemiah narratives. However, our eyes should not be closed to the various evidences found in the Abrahamic covenant, the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History, as well as in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah on the openness of Yahweh, the God of Israel, to all other nations, foreigners, aliens, sojourners, races, tribes and languages.

In view of the above, I plan to explore and refine further, the theological perspectives in Ezra and Nehemiah on the concept of Yahweh's people during the early post-exilic period (539-400 BC) in my Ph.D. research work.