

THE PLACE OF NON-JEWS/FOREIGNERS IN THE EARLY POST-EXILIC JEWISH COMMUNITY IN EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

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ABSTRACT

This article argues 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. Consequently, two viewpoints emerged from the text of Ezra and Nehemiah concerning non-exiles. The one is exclusive and the other is inclusive. The researcher contended that the inclusive perspective is the appropriate approach toward non-Jews as evidenced in the spirit of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as well as in the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history. In other words, the Abrahamic covenant¹ and certain passages from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history provide a framework for a religious and communal relationship between the Israelites and or Jews and foreigners.

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

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the problem

Much work has been done by scholars on several issues in Ezra-Nehemiah during the last twenty years. Through a brief scan of some of this literature, it seems obvious that little attention has been paid to the issue of the relationship between foreigners (including those who had not gone to the Babylonian exile) and the early post-exilic Jewish community (those who had returned from the Babylonian exile) in these books. It is with no doubt to suppose that the issue of other people in relation to those who had returned from exile during the early post-exilic period is very important in many ways and should have deserved much more attention.

First, it may be observed that the relationship between the returned exiles and the non-exiles is one of the integral motifs that have driven the storyline from the beginning of the book of Ezra through the end of the book of Nehemiah. If one removes the passages² that deal with the relationship between foreigners and the early post-exilic Jewish community from these books, the narratives in the books may become very fragmented such that no one would make any sense out of them.

Second, it is also self-evident from these books that without the participation of certain key foreigners (such as king Cyrus³, Artaxerxes, Darius etc.) in the initiation of the return of the post-exilic Jewish community and in the rebuilding of the altar, the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem, the community would have achieved virtually very little in the restoration process. It is therefore, very reasonable, to ask that, what kind of religious interest would foreigners and non-Jewish exiles have achieved given the fact that they had worked so much for the restoration of the returning Jewish exiles, the rebuilding of the altar, sanctuary or temple and the city walls of Jerusalem?

Third, the seeming inconsistent attitude of this early post-exilic Jewish community needs investigation. On the one hand, the command to build the temple, erect an

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

³ Strikingly, the role of Cyrus is compared to that of a Davidic King in Roberts (2002:376-377).

altar for the LORD and build the city walls of Jerusalem was initiated and supported by foreign kings (Ezr 1:1-2; 6:1-15; 7:11-26). In addition, other foreigners also helped in providing some building materials for the above projects (Ezr 3:7 Cf. 1 Ki 5:6-12). During all of these instances, the returned exiles did not resist some of these foreigners from helping them on the restoration process.

On the other hand, the returned exiles refused attempts of some of their neighbours to participate in the rebuilding of those same projects during the same period (Ezr 4:1-24). Why was such a contradiction of attitude toward non-exiles? On what ground did the community welcome some other people but refuse some from similar access?

Fourth, it may also be argued that other passages in the Old Testament seem to suggest that the relationship between the Jews and non-Jews was not a patent one. Previously, Moses had married a non-Israelite woman (Nm 12:1-3). Other foreigners also were accepted and absorbed in the Jewish community (e.g. Rahab, Bathsheba, and Ruth etc). A similar openness seemed to be present during King Hezekiah's reign (2 Chr 30:6-12) and during the reign of King Josiah (2 Chr 34:9). In both instances, those who resided in the northern part of Israel (irrespective of their ethnic affiliation) were welcomed to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem and to contribute to the work of repairing the temple, respectively. This seemed openness on the one hand and exclusiveness on the other hand also calls for the need to explore the relationship between the returned Jewish exiles and foreigners in Ezra-Nehemiah.

Fifth, the issue of the relationship between foreigners and the Jews or Israelites was generally important in the Old Testament context as a whole. The book of Jonah is one example of the struggle for the people of Israel to comprehend the relationship between Yahweh and other nations. One among the defining questions in the book of Jonah which may shed some light on the events in Ezra and Nehemiah is: does God care about foreigners or non-Israelites (such as the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh⁴) as He does about the Jews or Israelites?

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

Similarly, it appears from the accounts in Genesis that there is a provision in the covenant promises that God made with Abraham and his subsequent descendants, for foreigners to relate with the Jews.⁵ Theologically, the nucleus of this promise seems to concern the blessing of other nations including Ishmael (Gn 17:20) through Abraham and his descendants. God's reaffirmation of this promise with Abraham (Gn 17:4-21; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18), Isaac (Gn 26:2-5), and Jacob (Gn 28:13-15) underscore the seriousness of that promise. It also implies that the promise was probably an irrevocable one.

In view of the above designation that Abraham and his descendants would become the channel through which other nations would receive God's blessing, the need emerges for us to explore how this relationship was subsequently understood and applied in the early post-exilic period according to Ezra and Nehemiah.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

This study has five major aims and objectives. First, the aim and objective is to find whether non-Jews or non-exiles were allowed to relate with the early post-exilic Jewish community in their religious life and communal living according to Ezra and Nehemiah.

Second, the paper intends to discern the nature of the relationship between the returned exiles and other people who had remained in or around Judah.

Third, the research aims at discovering the basis on which the relationship between foreigners and the post-exilic Jews was sustained. Could the Abrahamic covenant promises⁶ serve as this basis? In other words, do the Abrahamic covenant and other pre-exilic Old Testament texts provide a framework for a subsequent religious and communal relationship between foreigners and Israelites or Jews?

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

⁶ Gn 12: 3: *"And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (The quotation is taken from the New American Standard Bible 1977 from Computer Bible Works). Cf. Gn 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

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

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

2. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PENTATEUCHAL AND DEUTERONOMIC-DEUTERONOMISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON FOREIGNERS

2.1 Introduction

There appear to be two perspectives concerning foreigners in the Pentateuch and in the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history. On the one hand, there are allusions in the Pentateuch and Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history that portray Israel as an open and welcoming society to foreigners⁷. On the other hand, there are certain texts that reveal Israel as an exclusive, non-conforming society regarding foreigners⁸. In view of this dual portrayal, it is not easy to make any serious case in favour of one perspective against the other. Nonetheless, I suppose, there are a number of indicators within Israel's covenant stipulations regarding foreigners/other nations which we may investigate in order to portray a picture of the nature of Israel's relationship with foreigners.

There are a number of covenants between God and Israel (namely, the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants etc.). In each of these covenants, there are allusions to the inclusion of foreigners in the operation of the covenants. In other words, there appear to be certain provisions in the various covenants for foreigners to rally around Yahweh, the God of Israel.

2.2 Foreigners in the Abrahamic covenant

⁷ Gn 17:12-13; 18:1-8; 19:1-3; Ex 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7; Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Dt 24:19-21; Dt 14:28-29; 26:12-15; Ex 20:8-11; 23:12; Dt 5:12-15; 1ki 8:41-43; 2 Chr 6:32-33.

⁸ Ex 23:31-33; Nm 31:1-12; Dt 7:1-6; Jos 21:44.

In the Abrahamic covenant, the allusions to foreigners are obvious. Firstly, God made a covenant promise that He will bless other nations or other nations will receive His blessings through Abraham or his offspring/seed⁹. This covenantal promise of 'blessing' obviously links Abraham to other nations. This linkage presupposes that there can be no other way for other nations to receive the covenantal blessing in question if those nations are totally excluded from having any relationship with Abraham or his descendants¹⁰.

Immediately following the covenant event in Genesis 17, Abraham and Lot welcomes strangers in their homes (Gn 18:1-8; 19:1-3) respectively, suggesting that Abraham (and Lot) practically begins to apply the covenant obligation of being a blessing to other nations (Gn 12:3-4). Strikingly, the two events of Abraham and Lot welcoming visitors in their separate homes appear to be comparable to each other¹¹.

Secondly, the covenant obligation of circumcision also alludes to the inclusion of foreigners in Israel's religious life (Fretheim 1994:461; Wenham 1994:22-24). The covenant obligation of circumcision insists on Abraham and his descendants to circumcise. In addition, all those who are under the auspices of Abraham are to be circumcised.

*"12 And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.
13 A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant"* (Gn 17:12-13 New American Standard Bible 1977).

⁹ Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

¹⁰ Fretheim (1994:424) argues that "God's choice of Abraham will lead to blessings for all the families of the earth...God's choice of Abram serves as an initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end. Election serves mission (in the broadest sense of the term)." Walton (2001:402) also contends that "In Abram, all nations of the earth were blessed as they were shown what God was like and as the means were provided for them to become justified, reconciled to God, and forgiven of their sins."

¹¹ Both Abraham and Lot are sitting down when the visitors arrives. In each case, the host bows down to greet the visitors. In both incidents, the visitors are provided with a meal. Unexpectedly, the three visitors at Abraham's site (home) turn out to be two at Lot's house.

Abraham adheres to the covenant obligation of circumcision as Genesis 17:23-27 attests. He circumcises every male in his household, including Ishmael and foreigners who were born in his house or bought elsewhere as slaves. This event obviously portrays the covenant obligation of circumcision as one of the means by which foreigners may be incorporated in the religious and social life of Israel¹².

2.3 Foreigners in the Mosaic Covenant

In the Mosaic covenant, there are also a number of passages that suggest that Israel could relate with foreigners or aliens¹³. For example the Pentateuch suggests three ways for the provision of food produce for the widow, orphan, alien and some times Levites. The Israelites are urged to provide some left-overs from their fields during the harvest period for these groups of people to scavenge (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Dt 24:19-21). In addition, every third year, a tithe of all produce is to be reserved for widows, orphans, sojourners and Levites (Dt 14:28-29; 26:12-15). Similarly, every seventh year, the land is left uncultivated. Anything that produces by itself from the uncultivated land is for the widows, orphans and sojourners (Ex 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7). Obviously, foreigners might live in the land of Israel before they may have access to this food produce.

Moreover, the Pentateuch also suggests that God executes justice (including the death penalty) for the cause of widows, orphans, aliens and strangers (Ex 22:21-

¹² Brueggemann (1982:155) provides the significance of circumcision by saying that "circumcision announces that Israelites belong only to this community and only to this God.... Circumcision as a positive theological symbol functioned in Israel as a metaphor for serious, committed faith. Thus the tradition speaks of the circumcision of the heart (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Ezek. 44:7)." I suppose, the importance of circumcision should not be viewed as limited to the Israelites alone; it applies to foreigners as well, specifically those who denounce their foreign gods and embrace the God of Israel. Such foreigners are regarded as members of Israelite community (or proselytes) because they have embraced Yahweh of Israel as their God (Cohn-Sherbok 2003:572-573).

¹³ When the Israelites came out of Egypt, there were other people who came out with them (Ex 12:38). These people were not chased away. It is most likely that these other people may have entered the Promised Land and may have settled down with the Israelites. Enns (2000:418) argues that the inclusion of aliens and servants in the Sabbath commandment presupposes that there were elements of aliens and foreigners among Israelites when they went out from Egypt. Moses specifically anticipated the presence of foreigners and aliens among the Israelites (Nm 15:14-15). As a result, he instructed that foreigners be allowed to sacrifice in the Temple just like native Israelites (Davies 1995:153-154). The Law did not discriminate against foreigners or aliens.

24¹⁴; Dt 10:18). If an alien, stranger, orphan or widow is mistreated, the guilty person will never go unpunished. The above cited references show that aliens and foreigners existed in Israelite community. The fact that a special plan was devised to care for the aliens and foreigners sustain the notion that aliens or foreigners were not totally excluded from the midst of the Israelites. They were expected to be part of the religious and social structures of the Israelite community.

Another covenant obligation was the Sabbath-keeping. God commands Israel to keep the Sabbath day holy. They were to rest from their labor on that day. All Israelites were to observe the Sabbath law, including aliens, strangers and slaves who were in their midst (Ex 20:8-11; 23:12; Dt 5:12-15). The Sabbath was a religious practice in Israel from one generation to the other. The inclusion of aliens in the Sabbath observance suggests that Israel had aliens in their midst. These aliens or foreigners were also allowed to observe the sacred days and religious festivals of Israelite community as may be seen from the above texts.

The celebration of the Passover was another way of incorporating foreigners or aliens in the religious life of the Israelite people (Ex 12:48-49; Nm 9:14). It is evident from this passages that aliens were allowed to celebrate the Passover together with the Israelites. God had instructed Moses and Aaron that aliens who are circumcised should be allowed to participate in the celebration of the Passover with the native Israelites.

Foreigners and native-born Israelites were equal before the Law of Yahweh (Ex 12:49; Nm 9:14; 15:13-16, 29-30). The law of Yahweh had the same application to the native-born Israelites as well as the alien. The same thing that the Law prescribed for the native-born Israelite was also required for the alien or foreigner living among the Israelites.

¹⁴ Exodus 22:21-24 says that, "And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. "You shall not afflict any **widow** or orphan. If you afflict him at all, *and* if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless."

Foreigners were integrated in the Israelite community through intermarriage as well (Houten 1991:61). Though, it appears from Deuteronomy 7:3 that intermarriage is totally forbidden, apparently, verse 4 and the context of this passage suggest that intermarriage prohibition is not necessarily the focus of this passage. Verse 4 indicates that idol worship is the definitive matter in the passage. Israel is to desist from worshipping other gods. They must not worship the gods of the Canaanites nor any other gods except Yahweh (Ex 20:3-6; Dt 5:7-10).

In view of this covenantal law, Israel is forbidden to intermarry with other people (foreigners) because they may be tempted to worship other gods apart from Yahweh, who redeems Israel from Egypt (Von Rad 1979:68). The implication is that Israel may intermarry with foreigners only when it is obvious that such women will totally denounce their foreign gods and embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel (Williamson 1985:130; Breneman 1993:149). The cases of Tamar (Gn 38:6-30; cf. Mt 1:3), 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) are sufficient examples to warrant such a line of thought.

2.4 Foreigners in the Davidic covenant

In the Davidic covenant, foreigners, aliens or strangers are also expected to come and worship in God's temple (1Ki 8:41-43; 2 Chr 6:32-33, cf. Allen 1999:497). King Solomon, as he prays for God to come and dwell in the newly built temple, he makes it clear that not only Israel would pray in the temple. Also aliens or foreigners may hear the Name of Yahweh and may like to come and worship Him (Keil 1975c:130). In such a circumstance where an alien or foreigner is willing to denounce other gods and embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel, the foreigner is welcome to do so. Solomon prayed for God to listen to the prayer of such a foreigner or an alien who comes to worship Yahweh in His temple (Seow 1999:79).

In summation, it is clear that there are certain provisions in the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants for the Israelites to relate with foreigners. Therefore, the exclusion of foreigners from Israelite community as can be observed from Ezra and Nehemiah could not be sustained on the basis of these covenants. In what follows, we will explore the passages that deal with foreigners in Ezra and Nehemiah in order

to identify the basis on which foreigners appear to be excluded from the Israelite community during the early post-exilic period. I am designating the two perspectives as exclusive and inclusive. I will narrate how these exclusive and inclusive perspectives play out in Ezra and Nehemiah narratives.

3. PERSPECTIVES IN EZRA AND NEHEMIAH CONCERNING NON-EXILES

There appear to be two perspectives on foreigners or non-exiles from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The first perspective belongs to the figures Ezra and Nehemiah and other returning exiles. This perspective appears to be very polemic concerning foreigners. The point of view on the covenant stipulations toward foreigners seems to be a very limited one. This polemic attitude concerning foreigners is revealed in the suspicion and harsh treatment of foreigners during the rebuilding of the altar (Ezr 3:1-3), temple (Ezr 4:1-5) and wall (Neh 2:19-20) and in the case of inter-marriage between Jews and non-Jews (Ezr 9:1-10:44; Neh 13:1-3, 23-28).

The second perspective is the one that stands in opposition to the above mentioned one. It is against the abhorrent reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah regarding foreigners. This perspective reveals that not every character in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah supports the repulsive perspective of Ezra and Nehemiah on foreigners (Ezr 10:15; Neh 13:28). Unfortunately, this latter perspective appears to be suppressed in the text of Ezra and Nehemiah but we have been able to identify certain traces of this suppressed perspective as well as the dominant viewpoint in what follows.

3.1 Ezra narrative¹⁵

3.1.1 King Cyrus' Orders

It is strange to observe that the narrative from the book of Ezra begins by identifying a foreigner, King Cyrus, as Yahweh's instrument (Ezr 1:1-11; cf. Is 44:28-45:1, 13). This perspective may be regarded as an inclusive one. King Cyrus' work is completely driven by divine conviction from the heart¹⁶. The King appears to be doing

¹⁵ I have decided to use present tense in describing Ezra and Nehemiah narratives. The purpose is to show the events in Ezra and Nehemiah as they are happening live or now.

¹⁶ The place where knowledge, wisdom, love and rationality dwells, according to the Hebrew mind, cf. Pr 3:1, 5; 4:21, 23; 6:21; 7:3; 10:8; 22:17-18; 23:15.

nothing except that which fulfils God's promise through prophet Jeremiah (v.1; cf. Jer 25:11-12; 27:22; 29:10; 51:1-12).¹⁷ Cyrus has authority from the God of heaven to rule the kingdoms of the earth and specifically to build a temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem in the territory of Judah (v.2)¹⁸. Who will oppose or obstruct such divine authoritative programme? Consequently, the tone is set for the divine plan to take its course in the book of Ezra.

The programme of events moves from verbal proclamation to actualization (v. 3-11). King Cyrus permits the Jews to go and rebuild the temple¹⁹ and urges that everyone (irrespective of racial, ethnic or linguistic background) should contribute to this divine project (Ezr 1:2-6). The king also reverses the action of his predecessor (Nebuchadnezzar) by removing all the articles belonging to the God of Israel from the temple in Babylon. He then hands them over to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. Every item is counted, so that nothing is diverted to some other place (Ezr 1:7-11). Then the first batch set their feet on the way and head back to Jerusalem (Ezr 2:1-70).

3.1.2 Rebuilding the Altar

A second encounter to what may appear as an allusion to foreigners is during the rebuilding of the altar (Ezr 3:1-6; cf. Ex 20:24-25; 27:6-7). This scene may have come from the exclusive perspective. The work of rebuilding the altar begins and continues to the end amidst fears of the people around them (Ezr 3:1-3). The phrase "amidst fears of the people around them" in verse 3, originates from the exclusive

¹⁷ According to 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 have a certain level of religious and socio-political autonomy, they will be more loyal to his administration. In view of this, he freed all the captives not only from Judah, but also from other nations. The text also names Marduk as the god who appointed Cyrus as king (Cf. Blenkinsopp 1989:75; Clines 1984:34-37). Whatever reason king Cyrus may have had, or whoever may have influenced him, the text of Ezra reveals that he was influenced by Yahweh, the God of Israel.

¹⁸ Will something good come from a foreigner? How can Yahweh allow His holy Temple to be rebuilt by an unholy gentile/foreigner? Can King Cyrus be compared to King Solomon? Both of them have a common divine obligation, namely, the building of God's Temple. There is little reason to doubt that this portion of the narrative may have come from an inclusive perspective.

¹⁹ Does the order imply that only the returning Jews should rebuild the Temple?

perspective. The allusion to the fear entertained by the returning exiles suggests that the group may have excluded other people from participating in the building of the altar. Though the focus of this pericope (Ezr 3:1-6) is on the success of the rebuilding of the altar, nonetheless, readers are allude to the function of the people around the exiles, namely, the people constitute an object of fear to the returning exiles.

There is no indication from the text about what the people around them had done. Why should the returning exiles entertain fear? Who are the people around them? Are they fellow returning exiles or are they remnants that stayed behind during the exile? Unfortunately, the text leaves these questions unanswered²⁰. Whoever this group might have been (it is most likely that these people were not part of the returning exiles), their role during the rebuilding of the altar is basically not appreciated because they constitute an object of fear to those who were rebuilding the altar.

3.1.3 Rebuilding the Temple

A third scene may be considered as a mixture of exclusive and inclusive perspectives (Ezr 3:7-6:22). This scene depicts mixed experiences between the newly returning exiles and those who surround them concerning the rebuilding of the temple. On the one hand, the exclusive perspective holds that the returning exiles commences work on rebuilding the temple, but they encounter series of oppositions from various enemies, individuals, groups, kings or foreigners. The opposition delays the work for a certain period of time before it was later completed.

On the other hand, the inclusive perspective reports that despite the above mentioned opposition to the work of rebuilding the temple, some people among foreigners still participate positively to the construction work (Ezr 3:7). For instance, the people of Sidon and Tyre²¹ contribute immensely to the rebuilding work by

²⁰ However, Klein (1999:691) argues that the people could have been Judah's neighbors such as Edomites and other foreigners mentioned in Ezra 4:9-10. Similarly, Breneman (1993:91-92) also suggests that these people are from Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, Edom, people's of foreign descent (including part Jews) living in Judah and Jews who had compromised their faith.

²¹ Ezk 28:1-26 portray Tyre and Sidon as notorious idolaters who take pride in their beauty and knowledge; they deal maliciously with Israel and other nations. In the perspective of Ezra and Nehemiah, there is no reason for such people to participate in rebuilding the temple of Yahweh.

bringing logs of wood from Lebanon to Joppa. Even the returning exiles appear to welcome the participation of these foreigners by providing food, drink and oil to them (v.7b). Nonetheless, it is unfortunate that when other surrounding people (the text names these people as enemies (Ezr 4:1) offer to assist in the same project, their request is turned down (v.2-3). Unexpectedly, it turns out that the work is also completed at the instance of a foreign king (King Darius, cf. Ezr 6:14-15).

It appears from this passage that the exclusive perspective probably wants to convince the reader that those, whose help was turned down, were enemies of the returning exiles and not friends (Ezr 4:1). It remains a question how the returning exiles differentiate between their enemies and their friends prior to what the enemies or friends might have done. It seems as if their supposed enemies appeared to have made a positive request and provide the rationale for their request (Ezr 4:2). The supposed enemies stated that they had been worshipping and sacrificing to the God of the returning exiles long ago. Their appeal to the religious practice of Israel ought to have been taken seriously²². Yet their claim was not recognized by the returning exiles.

Consequently, how the returning exiles appear to have known that this request is non-authentic remains questionable. Probably the response of the returning exiles here is examined at the backdrop of the previous incident when they had entertained fears from those who surrounded them as they were rebuilding the altar (Ezr 3:3, cf. Klein 1999:694). For some reason, the returning exiles reject the request²³ of the foreigners in categorical terms.

²² It is argued that "the author's identification of the neighbors as the 'adversaries of Judah' (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).

²³ Cohn-Sherbok (2003:78) argues 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."

"But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us²⁴ 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 commanded²⁵ us" (Ezr 4:3 NAS).

Even though we are not sure how the returning exiles identify certain people as their enemies, the events that unfold from now onward appear to support their presupposition about foreigners in a certain sense. The people²⁶ around them, unfortunately, reverses to embarrassing and social anarchy namely, threats, frustration, discouragement and opposition toward the rebuilding work following the turning down of their positive request to the returning exiles. In addition, they use political means and succeed in halting the project. This scene may have come from the exclusive perspective; hence, foreigners are portrayed in the scene as enemies to the cause of Yahweh and His people.

Apparently, the inclusive perspective argues that the work is revived and completed not only through divine initiative, but also at the orders of a foreign power (Ezr 6:1-22). One wonders what partnership these foreign kings might have had with the returning exiles based on the previous claims of the returning exiles (3:3; 4:3). Nonetheless, the narrator (who may have been speaking from an inclusive point of view) reveals to the reader that the work succeeds because of God's command and

²⁴ What was the common thing the Jews were looking for from the surrounding people? Did the returning exiles have anything in common with the people of Sidon and Tyre? Why should they allow the people of Tyre and Sidon to participate in the building of the temple but refuse similar offers from other foreigners? If the returning exiles had anything in common with the people of Tyre and Sidon, what was it?

²⁵ The decree of Cyrus is reinterpreted as if it gave the *Golah* community an exclusive right to rebuild the temple (Klein 1999:695).

²⁶ "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 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.

the decrees of foreign kings²⁷. Will God use what is unholy to accomplish His holy purposes? Can foreigners share divine knowledge with Israel? From an inclusive perspective, this scene is understandable because the answer to the above questions is 'yes'. However, in the context of the exclusive perspective, this text (Ezr 6: 14-15) portrays an absurd scene because foreigners have no share in Yahweh's programme. Therefore, it is unreasonable to think that foreigners can participate in the work of rebuilding the holy Temple.

3.1.4 Celebration of the Passover

The next scene (Ezr 6:19-22) provides an allusion to what appears to concern foreigners who celebrated the Passover Festival with the *Golah* community. This scene appears to be described from an inclusive perspective. One important scenario here is that the returning exiles celebrated their Passover not only with their corporate returnees; but possibly also with other gentiles, who appear to have separated themselves from the practices of their gentile neighbours (Ezr 6:21²⁸, cf. Williamson 1985:85; Klein 1999:713)²⁹.

The text (Ezr 6:21) makes a good distinction between gentiles or foreigners who may relate to the returning exiles in religious matters and those who may not. The passage seems to emphasize the separation from gentile practices and seeking Yahweh, the God of Israel. This criterion can hardly be found from the exclusive point of view since the exclusive perspective dwells solely on total or even absolute separation from foreigners. The question is: will this criterion stand the test of time in the community or will it evaporate as new religious leaders emerge and reinterpret the Torah of Moses? In what way would Ezra have responded to this scene, if he

²⁷ Kings Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes Ezr 6:14-15. The kings are said to have been influenced by Yahweh's command.

²⁸ 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, ate *the Passover*."

²⁹ Breneman (1993:121) and Keil and Delitzsch (1975c: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. But Klein (1999:713) and Williamson (1985:85) argue that the people were gentiles rather than Jews. Klein cites two passages from the Pentateuch (Ex 12:43-49 & Nm 9:14) which allow foreigners to participate in the Passover feast if they circumcise. It is most probable then, that the people in question may have been gentiles who had separated themselves from their gentile practices.

was present? These questions should be kept in mind as we continue to examine the narrative.

3.1.5 Ezra's Marriage Reforms

From now on, Ezra the priest appears on the narrative scene. He is armed with orders from the foreign king (Artaxerxes) to execute religious commands and to carry out other executive functions as well (Ezr 7:1-10:44). Ezra delivers the contributions to the temple as well as the orders from the king to the governors and leaders of Trans-Euphrates (Ezr 8:24-36). The local leaders are to provide assistance to Ezra's mission. The function of the assumed enemies is reversed by the orders from the foreign king. Instead of being instrument of threat and confusion, the orders from the king mandated the leaders of Trans-Euphrates to assist in whatever possible way for the success of Ezra's mission. But this scenario still begs the question, which is: how can these local foreign leaders give assistance to Ezra's mission if they are not allowed to relate with the returning exiles? Will Ezra take a policy which is inclusive or exclusive as described in the previous passages (Cf. Ezr 4:2-3)? The next section unveils how these two perspectives play out during the religious activities of Ezra (the priest and scribe) regarding foreigners.

As Ezra faces his mission, the narrator (whom we suppose represents the exclusive perspective) does not waste much time to let us know that Ezra encounters a serious fundamental religious wrongdoing within the 'holy race', namely, intermarriage (cf. Ezr 9:1-10:44)³⁰. Ezra spends the rest of his time handling this fundamental religious and social anarchy. The problem is stated that the holy seed intermarries with the people around them (Ezr 9:1-3). Who are these neighbours? Are they remnants who had not gone to exile? Or are they people, who were brought to the land of Israel from other nations (Ezr 4:2)? On what basis were these people not considered as part of the holy seed?

³⁰ Ezr 9:2 says: tAcr'a]h' yMe[;B. vd,Qoh; [r;z< Wbr>[t.hi (i.e. They have mortgaged the holy seed with the people of the land). This perspective recognizes the returning exiles as a 'holy seed'. This perspective concerning the returning exiles, without question, exclude the rest of the people from the returning exiles because other people are fundamentally outside the holy seed.

It is evident from this passage that these people are not Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians or Amorites (Breneman 1993:148). Though the accusation clearly reveals that the people in question have practices that are like those of the other nations listed above, but these people around the returning exiles are not one of the Canaanites tribes. So, who are these neighbours and why have they become an object of exclusion by these returning exiles?³¹ The passage leaves this question unanswered. This discussion is not going to address some of these unanswered questions. However, it is important to reveal these questions so that readers may know that the text raises them.

On hearing this charge against the returning exiles, Ezra breaks in tears, splits his clothing and pulls off his hair and sits down for the whole day (Ezr 9:3). Everyone who trembles at this incident joins Ezra in his self abasement (9:4). Ezra moves to the next phase later in the evening and confesses Israel's sin (9:5-10:4). He makes the case very obvious. Intermarriage between these returning exiles and other peoples of the land constitute serious disobedience to God's covenant laws. Firstly, the holy race is mingled (Ezr 9:3). Secondly, intermarriage is liken to making a covenant with the people of the land (Ezr 9:11-12). Thirdly, intermarriage also means the returning exiles are unfaithful to God and His covenant (10:2). How would this great religious and social anomaly be remedied? The next pericope provides a solution from the exclusive point of view.

Ezra makes it obvious that the only alternative solution is through a covenantal process (10:3). The covenant must be renewed. During such a ceremony, every person who marries a foreign woman must divorce the woman together with her children. This means total or absolute separation from foreigners. The plan is said to be acceptable to many people except few others (10:10-15 cf. Keil & Delitzsch 1975c:131)³². Those who reject the plan are likely to be from an inclusive standpoint.

³¹ Klein (1999:733) asserts that these are people who had not gone to exile and those who had not been fully absorbed into the *Golah* community. If they were Israelite people who have not gone to exile, does this amount to being excluded from the holy seed?

³² Klein (1999:742-743) and Williamson (1985:156-157) argues that the four people mentioned in Ezra 10:15 took a more rigid and exclusive approach than the one proposed by others. However, Keil & Delitzsch (1975c:131) argues on the contrary that the four people actually opposed the divorce proposal. The four men were more sympathetic to foreigners. The fact that the view of the four men is not spelled out in this passage may suggest that they actually opposed the decision

As a consequence, the few people who disagree with the above divorce plan are ignored. The process of divorce takes its course to the end (10:18-44).

In view of the above background, a question may be asked: which book of the law³³ Ezra uses as his reference point for his painful divorce approach? Could his law on intermarriage be derived from Deuteronomy 7:3³⁴? If this is Ezra's basis, how does Ezra understand the passage? It is evident from the context of this verse that idolatry was the subject matter here. Nowhere in the Pentateuch do we find an explicit rejection of intermarriage if the worship of foreign gods was not the main reason for the prohibition (Breneman 1993:149; Williamson 1985:130-131).

It is a further question, what Ezra would do with biblical passages³⁵ that clearly reveal that intermarriage between the Israelites and foreigners is possible if the basic condition is observed, namely, the foreigner embracing Yahweh, the God of Israel. Moses' marriage³⁶ (Nm 12:1-3) illustrates this reality. This case, at least, should never have obscured Ezra's purview. Why should Ezra use such a harsh method to deal with the problem of intermarriage?

As I have mentioned previously this investigation is not intended to answer the many questions that the text of Ezra and Nehemiah have raised because of the limit of this study. However, it is a fact that Ezra's perspective on intermarriage was

to divorce foreign women. It is most likely that the whole community may have prevailed over the four men. So, the divorce proceedings were carried out since majority carries the vote in a democratic system.

³³ Grabbe (1998b:146-147) asserts that the book of the Law or Moses referred to in several passages in Ezra and Nehemiah may have been the complete Pentateuch. This does not necessarily mean it was the final copy as we have it. It only means Ezra had all the five books of the Pentateuch in his Law book. Grabbe arrives at this conclusion based on the fact that Ezra and Nehemiah have passages that have been derived from all the five books of the Pentateuch.

³⁴ 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."

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ The above text reveals that Moses got married to a non-Israelite woman. Moses' marriage contributed to the opposition he had experienced from his two siblings-Miriam and Aaron.

unacceptable to some other people (Ezr 10:15³⁷). The passage provides a hint of this opposition but fails to let us know what really happens to those who oppose Ezra's proposal. Were these opponents excluded from Israel together with their families or were they allowed to remain among the supposed 'holy race'?

Another question may also be asked: what was Ezra's concept of holiness? How holy was Israel if we compare this claim from Ezra 9:2³⁸ with Deuteronomy 9:4-6³⁹? The narrative leaves us pondering even about the situation of the families that have been split. The babies and women might be left without a male supporter and vice versa. How will such children understand this painful family separation (Klein 1999:746)? Will this separation lead to the holiness of the returning exiles?

3.2 Nehemiah narrative

3.2.1 Nehemiah receives Orders from Artaxerxes

In this narrative, Nehemiah hears a disturbing report about the returning exiles and the city of Jerusalem (Neh 1:1-11). He is deeply moved by the plight of his people and he therefore, plans to provide a solution that will ease the plight of his people. In view of the above, we encounter several incidents where foreigners are described either as enemies to the cause of Nehemiah (from an exclusive perspective) or as source of help toward the same cause (from an inclusive perspective).

The first striking similarity between the narrative in Nehemiah 1-2 and the story from Ezra 1:1-11 is that in both instances, it is a foreign king who provides orders for a project to be carried out in Judah. Here in Nehemiah 1-2, God hears Nehemiah's

³⁷ 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."

³⁸ 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."

³⁹ Deuteronomy 9:4-6 "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".

prayer and moves the heart of king Artaxerxes to act in favour of Nehemiah's requests (Neh 2:8). This narrative scene is portrayed from an inclusive point of view. A foreign king becomes Yahweh's instrument for abating the painful plight of His people, the returning exiles. Also the wife of king Artaxerxes does not object the divine causality (Neh 2:6)⁴⁰.

A second similarity is that Nehemiah receives letters from a foreign king, Artaxerxes, ordering the governors and leaders of Trans-Euphrates to support Nehemiah's cause (Neh 2:7-9) just as Ezra did (Ezr 7:11-28). Unfortunately, the leaders of the Trans-Euphrates, on hearing this news, are disturbed, because someone has come to promote the welfare of the Jews (Neh 2:10). Will these foreigners support Nehemiah's cause or will they become instruments of threat and intimidation? Will they work against this task which is motivated by Yahweh?

These first two chapters of the book of Nehemiah create mixed feelings to the reader about the role of foreigners in Yahweh's plan for Israel. On the one hand, foreigners, like king Artaxerxes show a welcoming attitude toward the project and support it by providing written orders to the leaders of the region to assist in the project. On the other hand, foreigners are supposedly having an abhorrent feeling about the goal of the project. With this ill feeling, what would be the nature of the role of foreigners in this divine mission? Will the neighbouring people support or reject the cause of Nehemiah? What will be the reason for the rejection or acceptance of Nehemiah's mission? In the next scene, these questions may become self-revealing.

3.2.2 Opposition to the work of rebuilding the wall

In this narrative scene (Neh 2:10-20; 4:1-23; 6:1-7:3), the first allusion to foreigners shows that foreigners have a bad feeling about the prospect of the returning exiles and as such, have begun to express scornful words toward the rebuilding project (Neh 2:10, 19). This scene appears to be depicted from the exclusive point of view.

When Nehemiah unveils the plan to rebuild the wall and Jerusalem before the returning exiles, on hearing the plan, their neighbours start abusing the whole

⁴⁰ Kidner (1979:81) reasons 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 as well.

mission (Neh 2:17-19). Nevertheless, Nehemiah is convinced that the God of heaven will grant success to His servants who will rebuild the wall (Neh 2:20). Surprisingly, Nehemiah makes a statement which appears to have no prior reference. He argues that the neighbours have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to Jerusalem. To what share, claim or historic right does Nehemiah refer? Is it the right to live, worship, do business, own property or socialize in Jerusalem or what is it that which Nehemiah refers to?⁴¹ The passage leaves the question unanswered.

As the work progresses, the narrator who is likely reporting from an exclusive view point, wastes no time in letting the reader know that foreigners constitute a major anti-Jewish force in attempt to halt the divine mission (Neh 4:1-23 & 6:1-19). Nehemiah is not scared, rather he prays to His God and organizes his people to face this challenge. Finally, the mission is accomplished. Foreigners are led to admit that the work is possible through the hand of God (6:16).

3.2.3 Confession of Sins

The next pericope that mentions foreigners is Nehemiah 9:1-2. This scene also is most likely to reflect the exclusive point of view. The Israelites gather to confess their sins. The text makes clear that only those who are separated from foreigners are accepted in the assembly (Neh 9:2). This incident raises the question, why is the criterion for the inclusion in the assembly separation from foreigners?⁴² At the same time, the allusion illustrates that from an exclusivist perspective, foreigners are not allowed to participate in such a religious assembly.

⁴¹ Klein (1999:761) asserts that Nehemiah's statement here means "his opponents will have no political share in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam 20:1; 1 Kgs 12:16), no claim to exercise jurisdiction or citizenship there, and no right to participate in the worship at the Jerusalem Temple (Cf. Ezra 4:3)." Similarly, Blenkinsopp (1989:226-227) argues that Nehemiah's statement above may be regarded as a declaration of political, judicial, economic and religious independence on behalf of the Judean region. In view of Nehemiah's motive, he appears to argue that these foreigners have no political association, legal rights to exercise jurisdiction or right to participate in the Jerusalem cult.

⁴² Williamson (1985:311) thinks that the use of the word [r;Z< (seed) of Israel and the separation from rk'nE (foreigners) in Nehemiah 9:2 suggest an exclusive racial understanding of Israel's own identity. However, Clines (1984:190) and Keil and Delitzsch (1975c:236) appear to be more sympathetic to this group by arguing that this action (v.2) was not marital separation or any measures taken that only Israelites should be admitted to the assembly. Rather it was a voluntarily renunciation of the connections with foreigners and of their practices.

If we examine this criterion further, a question may arise: What is the concept of sin, forgiveness and holiness of the returning exiles? Since it is an occasion for the confession of sins, one would expect that foreigners might be allowed to join in the assembly in order to confess their sins. On the contrary, they are kept to be separate, in order for the returned exiles to attend the religious assembly.

3.2.4 Signing an agreement

The Israelites move on to sign an agreement they had reached among themselves during the confession assembly. One of the points of agreement was that everyone was to separate from the neighbouring people for the sake of the Law (Neh 10:28-30⁴³). This incident appears to have originated from an exclusive perspective. Which Law is in question? Does the Law prohibit Israel from having any foreign relationship? And further, how will Israel explain their relationship with other foreigners who participate positively toward the success of Nehemiah's mission, namely king Artaxerxes?

3.2.5 Nehemiah's reforms concerning foreigners

Finally, we come to the last narrative scene where the case of foreigners is sealed (Neh 13:1-31) from the exclusive point of view. The first three verses in this chapter 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 is read, the assembly learned that the book of Moses prohibits the Ammonites or Moabites from entering into a sacred assembly of the Israelites. The reason is clearly stated in verse 2. The two tribes did not show hospitality to the Israelites but request Balaam to curse Israel. The prohibition appears to be derived from Deuteronomy 23:3-6.

One of the concerns here is the attitude of the Jewish assembly. Having read from Deuteronomy 23:3-6 (I suppose), they decided to exclude everyone who was of foreign descent from their sacred assembly. Tobiah (13:4-5) and the grand son of

⁴³ 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. The situation of Ezra-Nehemiah called for this separation in order to secure the continuity of the redeemed community.

Eliashib (13:28) appeared to be flashed out on the basis of this prohibition. But the context of Deuteronomy 23:3-6 suggests that some other foreigners could be allowed to fellowship with the Israelites (Dt 23:7-8). Edomites and Egyptians are specifically mentioned in this category. A question then arises: on which basis do the returning exiles completely exclude every foreigner (instead of Ammonites and Moabites) from their sacred assembly? It is obvious that the text of Deuteronomy does not warrant such a sweeping exclusion of foreigners.

Another concern is the event of intermarriage (Neh 13:23-28). Nehemiah learns about the intermarriage between the returning exiles and the neighbouring peoples. He fiercely responds to the Jews who committed such an abhorrent action. He rebukes them, calls curses on them, beat some of them and pulls out their hair. He forces them to take an oath in God's name so that they may separate from their foreign partners. He points out that Solomon had failed because of such foreign marital relationships. The returning Jews are not greater than Solomon. As King Solomon failed religiously (which was precipitated by inter-marriage), the Jewish-foreign marriages during Nehemiah's time will inevitably doom the religious commitment of the returning exiles.

In view of the above harsh treatment of those who associated with foreigners, several questions may be asked. Firstly, would a foreigner be allowed to embrace Yahweh, the God of the returning exiles and desert his or her foreign god(s)? In the exclusive point of view, it is impossible for a foreigner to abandon his gods and embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel. However, from the inclusive point of view, it is possible. But how will that happen if foreigners are not allowed to come into the sacred assembly of the returning exiles? Through what means the new Israel (the returning Jews) will become holy? Is it through total or partial separation from foreigners or is it through something else?

4 CONCLUSION

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

racess 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 at 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.

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