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

by

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## **DEDICATION**

*This work is dedicated to Oreland Presbyterian Church USA, John and JoAnn Swart and my wife Joyce Member Usue. It is through their spiritual, emotional and financial support that I have been able to accomplish this study. May this work be used for the glory of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*

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## ABSTRACT

The aims and objectives of this investigation were to find whether non-Jews or non-exiles related with the early post-exilic Jewish community in their religious life and communal living according to Ezra and Nehemiah; to discern the nature of such relationship; to discover the basis on which this relationship was sustained; and 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).

The inquiry reveals 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 covenant 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.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

A preacher once said that a person without a vision is a person without a future; and a person without a future will always return to his or her past.<sup>1</sup> This statement is closely related to what Barna (1996:104-105) said that visionless people view change as a threat to their comfort zone. They live in denial of the future; and as such, they wed their life to the past and the present which seem to be familiar to their experience. Such people long and remember the way things used to be (the good old days). One with a vision has to develop a great deal of patience and endurance before he or she may live with such a visionless person.

The above description of visionless people is true to a large extent but not in all circumstances. First, if we take it at face value, it may suggest that anyone who turns to the past is without a vision. This is simply not true. Second, it may also mean that the past is completely irrelevant for our present and subsequent usage. This too is not a valid assumption.

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<sup>1</sup> The researcher watched the preacher (his name is forgotten by the researcher at the time this research was written) on a video titled: "Millennium 2000" prepared by the Great Commission Movement from the United States. The video tape was prepared to educate Christians to develop a vision for the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world.

On the contrary, it is self-evident that the past is good and valid as is the present and the future.<sup>2</sup> We need the past, the present as well as the future to be able to function well in any given society. So, I learned from my experience that we study history in order that we may know the past, shape or correct the present and therefore prepare for the future. From this understanding, Keto (2001:xi, 3-5) was right when he argued that the knowledge of the past “assists societies to create and recreate their social, cultural and political identities as well as to adopt a preferred vision for the future”. I may add a spiritual or religious category to Keto’s list of identities and would also reiterate that the past also helps one to know, form and shape his or her religious and spiritual identity and plan for the future.

Similarly, the Christian faith in God is rooted in the history of humankind. The faith in God was founded, developed and shaped over thousands of years through divine-human agency (cf Enns 2000:22). This faith in God is based upon word and deed revelation. This revelation has taken place in the history of the world and has been documented in Scripture (Old and New

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that everything that has happened in the past is good. Many things have happened in the past that are very bad such as slavery, Jewish holocaust, the apartheid system in South Africa, civil war in Nigeria, 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> World wars, etc. These are very painful events but are important for us today because these may help us understand the world that we live in. These may also inform and impact our present and future decision making on world peace.

Testaments) for the benefit of the previous, present and future generations of believers in God (Warfield 1927:3-5; 29-33, 429).<sup>3</sup>

As we observed that history is generally valid, a similar value is found in the historical aspect of the Christian faith in God. This research will therefore deal with the historical aspect of the Christian faith in God as documented in Scripture, particularly, the relationship between non-Jews or foreigners and the early post-exilic Jewish community<sup>4</sup> found in Ezra and Nehemiah. Historical, religious and social affinity between non-Jews in general and the Jews of the early post-exilic community will be discussed. Attention will also be paid to the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17 as well as God's promise to Abraham concerning the blessing of other nations through him or his seed.<sup>5</sup> Mention will also be made to certain texts that concern foreigners from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic history.<sup>6</sup> The relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the events that have occurred in Ezra and Nehemiah in relation to other nations will be explored.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dt 4:9; 6:6-9; 11:19-21; Heb 1:1-2; 2:1-5; 12:25-26; 2 Tm 3:16-17; 2 Pt 1:19-21.

<sup>4</sup> The early post-exilic Jewish period is said to fall between 538-400 BC (Alberty 1994:437).

<sup>5</sup> Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

<sup>6</sup> "Scholars identify the books from Joshua through Kings as the 'Deuteronomic History' or 'Deuteronomistic History' (DH)" (Dillard & Longman III 1994:153-154).

## **1.2 RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY**

This research will contribute to the existing literature on Ezra-Nehemiah, concerning the relationship between the newly returned exiles from Babylon to the land of Judah and other people who had not gone into exile including foreigners.

The study will also help readers to understand that the Abrahamic covenant and certain texts from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History provide a framework through which all other nations might be allowed to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel. The researcher hopes that this understanding will shelve the unhealthy religious and communal divides that might exist between similar groups today.

The investigation will enable readers to know how the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah re-interpreted certain texts from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History to support the religious and social reforms during the early post-exilic period.

## **1.3 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 issue of foreigners (or the rest of the other people who had not gone to the Babylonian exile) in relation to the early returned exiles from Babylon to Judah 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 passages<sup>8</sup> 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 Cyrus<sup>9</sup>, Artaxerxes, Darius etc) in the initiation of the return of the post-exilic Jewish community and in the

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<sup>7</sup> See the bibliographical references at the end of this dissertation. Most of these references deal with other issues in Ezra-Nehemiah. Only few of them discuss the relation of foreigners or non-Jews to the early post-exilic Jewish community.

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

<sup>9</sup> Strikingly, the role of Cyrus is compared to that of a Davidic King in Roberts (2002:376-377).

rebuilding of the altar, the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem, the community would have achieved virtually very little in the restoration process. It is therefore, very reasonable, to argue that such active participation of foreigners in the restoration of the postexilic Jewish community was of invaluable benefit, not only for the restored community, but also for the interest of the non-exiles (including non-Jews). If such was the case, what was that benefit? To put it theologically, what kind of religious interest would foreigners (including the Jews who had not gone to exile) have achieved given the fact that they had worked so much for the restoration of this returning exile community, the rebuilding of the altar, sanctuary (temple) and city walls of Jerusalem?

Third, the seeming inconsistent attitude of this early post-exilic Jewish community also causes concern for the need to explore the issue of the relationship between non-Jews and the early post-exilic Jewish community. On the one hand, the command to build the temple, erect an 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 early post-exilic Jewish community did not resist some of these foreigners from helping them on the restoration process.



On the other hand, the early post-exilic Jewish community 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 among this early post-exilic Jewish community? On what grounds did the community welcome some other foreigners to assist in rebuilding the projects and others excluded 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 (eg 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. On this issue, Cogan (1988:291) also observed that "the Chronicler and his audience were prepared to assimilate non-Israelites into the community of the worshipers of the God of Israel". He argued that this sort of openness must have created some tension between the Chronicler and his audience versus Ezra-Nehemiah and their audiences. 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 during this early post-exilic period in order to determine the actual state of foreigners in that period.

Fifth, I would like to put the relationship of Jews and foreigners in light of a larger Old Testament context. 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 and hopefully in Ezra and Nehemiah is: does God care about foreigners or non-Israelites (such as the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh<sup>10</sup>) as He does about the Jews or Israelites?

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.<sup>11</sup> 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

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<sup>10</sup> Jnh 1-4:11... "Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

<sup>11</sup> Gn 12:3; 17:4-16, 19; 18:18, 19; 22:17, 18; 26: 2-5; 28:13-15.

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, it implicitly suggests that the blessings of other nations or foreigners would depend upon the manner they relate with Abraham or his descendants (Gn. 12:3). This verse may be understood as a divine reciprocal promise: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." It appears from this text that other nations are inseparably tied to Abraham through this divine reciprocal blessing. God is the one doing the blessing but He does it in the context of the manner other nations relate with Abraham. From this affinity of foreigners to Abraham and his descendants<sup>12</sup>, 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.

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<sup>12</sup> There are similar allusions to this sweeping promise of blessing Abraham, his descendants and other nations in other passages such as Psalm 72:17; 87: 4-7; Is 19: 23-25). It can therefore be argued that since there are several references concerning the relation of foreigners to Abraham and his descendants in the Old Testament, it undoubtedly underscore the validity of taking the issue of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews seriously. It also underscores the need to explore how this relationship was subsequently understood and applied in the early post-exilic period.

A word of caution must be made here that this selected research field is not going to provide exhaustive solutions to the concerns that have been identified above. In any case, the problems have been raised because they are important and should not be obscured when examining the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Further study is encouraged where current effort is limited.

#### **1.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

This study has several aims and objectives.

First, the aim and objective is to find whether foreigners or non-Jews 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 researcher intends to discern the nature of the relationship between the Jews who had returned from exile 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 promises <sup>13</sup> serve as this basis? In other words, do the Abrahamic covenant and other pre-exilic Old Testament texts provide a

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<sup>13</sup> 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.

framework for a subsequent religious and communal relationship between foreigners and Israelites or Jews?

Fourth, if such 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 racial prejudice or at least exclusivity in their dealing with non-Jews as supposed by others (cf Williamson 1987:83).

## 1.5 HYPOTHESIS

This research has a dual hypothesis. *The first facet is that the study demonstrates that the Abrahamic covenant<sup>14</sup> 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 (other nations).*

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<sup>14</sup> 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.

*A second facet is that this investigation shows 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*

## **1.6 METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

This research has utilized a multifaceted method and design. The literary and historical methods have been used with a theological perspective (cf Gorman 2001:8). The researcher's conviction is that the text of the Bible is a literary, historical and theological document (McKenzie & Haynes 1999:20-21). What this means is that the biblical text has a record of events that have happened in history. This history is theological (Enns 2000:23-25). In other words, Biblical writers used literary devices to write the theological history. They wrote the history with a theological purpose, motive or goal (cf Warfield 1927:429; Merrill 1994:48; Miller 1999:20-21).

This inquiry has taken each of these three components: literary, historical and theological aspects, seriously. This kind of approach is closely related to what Longman III (1997:113) said,

“it is not only possible, it is necessary to integrate literary analysis with the study of history and the text's ideology (theology). They are all aspects of the text's act of communication...Literary analysis can distort our understanding of the message of the bible if practiced alone.”

In view of the above, the literary account of the theological history of the early post-exilic Jewish community in relation to foreigners recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah is examined. The study took the literature of Ezra and Nehemiah as its primary sources of information. It has examined the specific passages<sup>15</sup> that deal with the issue of foreigners or non-Jews in Ezra, Nehemiah and some other related biblical texts. The investigation also include secondary literature that deal with the Jews and non-Jews in the Persian period. This research also examined a few passages in the book of Genesis in order to conceptualize what the Abrahamic covenant says about foreigners or other nations in relation to the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Summarily, this investigation has utilized the synchronic method<sup>16</sup> deliberately more than the diachronic<sup>17</sup> one for several reasons. First, the scope or limits of this study does not warrant an exhaustive exegetical method.

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<sup>15</sup> Ezr 1:1-2. Cf. Is 44:28- 45:1; Jr 25:11-14; 29:10-14; Ezr 2:59-63. Nm 1:18-19; Ezr 3:7 Cf. 1 Ki 5:6-12; Ezr 4:1-24 Cf. 2 Ki 17:24-41; Neh 6: 16; Ezr 5:3-17; Neh 2:10, 19; 4:1-3, 7-8, 11, 15; 6:1-9, 12-14; 6:17-19; Ezr 6:1-15; 6:21-22; 7:11-26; Neh 2:1, 6, 8; 8:36. 2 Ki 17:24-41 Ezr 4:1-5; Neh 1:2, 3; Ezr 9:1-2; 10:18, 44; 9:3-15; 10:1; 10:2-44; Neh 10:28- 39; 13:23- 28; Ezr 9:2. Cf. Is 6:13; Neh 9:2; 13:30; 12:30; 13:1- 9; 13:15-22.

<sup>16</sup> Gorman (2001:12) defined synchronic method as that form of biblical exegesis that “looks only at the final form of the text, the text as it stands in the Bible as we have it.” Similarly, Wenham (1987:xxxiv) argues that “the new literary critic [synchronic critic] wants to understand how the final editor viewed his material and why he arranged it in the way he did” (cf Dillard & Longman III 1994:96-97).

<sup>17</sup> Gorman (2001:15) defined diachronic method as that form of exegesis that “focuses on the origin and development of a text....this approach is often referred to as the *historical-critical method*.” Cf. Wenham 1987:xxxiv.

Second, I believe that my major task in this inquiry is not to show how the various parts of the books, namely Ezra, Nehemiah and Genesis came into being,<sup>18</sup> rather, the task here concerns the Masoretic text of Ezra-Nehemiah<sup>19</sup> (cf Enns 2000:20-21), and what the Hebrew text says about the relationship between the Jews and non-Jews in the early post-exilic period. It is self-evident that much can be learned from knowing how particular texts of the Bible came into being. In dealing specifically with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the researcher has utilized information derived from a synchronic method and less from the diachronic approach.

Third, there are however, several diachronic arguments<sup>20</sup> concerning the historicity, reliability and sources of individual books of the Hebrew Scripture. Similar arguments (eg Breneman 1993:3543; Williamson 1985:xxiii-xxxv) have been propounded on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>21</sup> There is no question that such arguments are valid in their own right. It is important for a Biblical exegete to be familiar with matters that lie behind a given text namely sources, time sequence, original audience, authorial intention et cetera.

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<sup>18</sup> Though diachronic method also is a valuable exegetical way of arriving at the meaning of a text; and I have employed it at some points (eg composition and chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah) in this research, however, I have used the method sparingly in the overall thesis.

<sup>19</sup> BHS- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.

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

<sup>21</sup> See also chapter two of this thesis from the selected research fields on central issues that have concerned scholars in Ezra and Nehemiah.



Despite the validity of the diachronic approach, it has not provided a non-questionable, coherent answer to the concerns that the text of the Hebrew Scripture has posed for its readers. In addition, arguments concerning sources (eg Genesis) are “always bound to be hypothetical, whereas the final form of the text is a reality” (Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone 2001:49). This investigation will therefore limit its scope particularly, to the text of Ezra, Nehemiah and hopefully parts of Genesis. The narratives in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah as well as other passages in the Bible, are taken in a literal sense. The accounts or narratives in each of the books (i.e. Genesis, Ezra and Nehemiah) are taken as a literary unit in their own right. The researcher is aware of the difficulty of such a method but has consciously opted to do so in order to limit the scope of this work. As such, this method of investigation is open to constructive criticism where appropriate.

## **1.7 CHAPTER DIVISION, ORTHOGRAPHY AND DESCRIPTION OF TERMS**

There are three aspects in this section. The first feature provides introductory information on each of the chapters. The second part is a brief explanation to orthographical matters used in this inquiry. Meanwhile, the last aspect deals with the description of certain terms used in this research.

### 1.7.1 Chapter division

Chapter one deals with introductory subjects. These include the relevance of the study, need for the research, aims and objectives, research hypothesis, methodology, chapter divisions, orthographical information and description of certain terms used in the work.

Chapter two examines selected research fields on Ezra and Nehemiah. The issue of unity between Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles is discussed. Other matters investigated are composition, chronology and unity between Ezra and Nehemiah, date, authorship, theology and the relationship between Jews and foreigners in the early post-exilic period as well as certain related matters.

Chapter three investigates the context and nature of the Abrahamic covenant as well as the meaning of the covenant promise(s) to Abraham (Gn 12: 3b; 18:18; 22:18), Isaac (Gn 26:4) and Jacob (Gn 28:14). The relationship between the Abrahamic/the Mosaic covenants and the events in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning foreigners is explored.

Chapter four discusses two perspectives on foreigners in the Pentateuch, Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic History and in Ezra and Nehemiah. The investigation reveals that there are two perspectives concerning foreigners which include exclusive and inclusive perspectives.

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

#### 1.7.2 Orthography

This study uses the Harvard reference system<sup>22</sup> (author-date reference system) and the research 'guidelines for students' (compiled by Kritzinger 2001) suggested by the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. The author, date of publication and page number(s) are used in brackets to indicate the source of an idea which is not original to the researcher. The detail references are provided in the bibliography following the last chapter.

Other materials used in the research are The New American Standard Bible 1977 (NAS, for all the English Bible quotations), BHS- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (4<sup>th</sup> ed. for Hebrews words, phrases and quotations) and LXX- Septuagint Rahlfs' (Greek Translation of the Old Testament).<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew transliteration used in the study is derived from Kelley (1992:1).

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<sup>22</sup> Kilian, J 1989. *Form and style in theological texts: A guide for the use of the Harvard reference system*. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev ed. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

<sup>23</sup> All these three versions (NAS, BHS and LXX) of the Bible are extracted from Computer 'Bible Works' programme.

### 1.7.3 Description of Terms.

There are several terms that have been used in the content of this work to describe particular groups of people. For the sake of my research topic, the group who returned from Babylonian exile to Judah have been recognized as the supposed post-exilic Jewish community, while the people who remained in or around the land of Judah or Israel during the Babylonian exile are considered foreigners. Therefore, my dissertation should be understood as dealing with the relationship between the Jews or Israelites who had returned from the Babylonian exile to the land of Judah and the people who lived in and around Judah and Israel during and after the exile.

Israelites and Hebrews: These terms refer to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons who later became the twelve tribes of Israel as found in the Pentateuch. These terms are used when references are made to the stories or passages from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic history.

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

Post-exilic Jews or Jewish community: This group refers particularly to those of Israelite descents who were taken to Babylonian and later returned to the land of Judah. Other terms that are used to describe the same group of people include: the *Golah* community, the returned exiles, returning exiles, returning Jews and the post-exilic Israelites. The reader of Ezra and Nehemiah may find out that the religious and social reforms in the post-exilic period had attempted to separate this group from the people who were living in and around the land of Judah and Israel during and after the Babylonian exile. In other words, the returning exiles appeared to be considered by the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah as the only legitimate descendants of the pre-exilic Israel. This distinction is so pervasive in Ezra and Nehemiah that the Jews or Israelites who had remained in the land of Judah or Israel during the Babylonian exile, sometimes, were been treated as non-Israelites, non-Jews or even as foreigners.

Foreigners, Aliens and Sojourners: These terms are used interchangeably to describe those who are not Israelites by descent: Those who did not biologically descend from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve tribes of Israel. In the book of Ezra and Nehemiah, other terms are used to describe such groups, namely, people of the land, the surrounding people or nations and neighbours of the returning exiles. Other groups that came under this classification also include: Canaanite tribes, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites,

Egyptians, and certain tribes around the Trans-Euphrates. In some cases, the editor(s) or author(s) of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah consider the Jews or Israelites who had not gone to exile as outsiders.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **SELECTED RESEARCH FIELDS ON EZRA-NEHEMIAH**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter reviews selected research fields of scholars on primary issues in Ezra and Nehemiah. The subject matters include the relationship of 1 and 2 Chronicles to Ezra-Nehemiah, the composition and chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah, date and authorship, theology of Ezra-Nehemiah as well as the relationship between non-Jews and the post-exilic Jewish community and other minor themes in Ezra and Nehemiah.

#### **2. 2 SELECTED RESEARCH FIELDS ON EZRA- NEHEMIAH**

##### **2. 2.1 Introduction**

The book of Ezra and Nehemiah has received much attention from Biblical scholars in the last twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Much of this attention is directed toward several aspects of the books. In the following, this research has reviewed selected literature and has outlined some of the major issues that have been subject to scholarly investigation in the last twenty years.

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<sup>1</sup> See Clines (1984, 1990); Williamson (1985); McConville (1985); Bracy (1988); Blenkinsopp (1989); Throntveit (1992); Breneman (1993); Eskenazi (1993, 1994); Japhet (1994); Smith-Christopher (1994); Bowman (1995); Richards (1995); Van Wyk (1996); Brown (1998) and Grabbe (1998a & b).

### 2.2.2 Unity with 1 and 2 Chronicles

The first issue is that of the unity of 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah. Many scholars<sup>2</sup> (Clines 1984:2; Dillard & Longman III 1994:181; Throntveit 1992:9) previously advocated that 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as Ezra-Nehemiah are the works of a single author or editor. Those who advocated this theory pointed to the overlap in 2 Chronicles and Ezra (see 2 Chr 36:22-23; Ezr 1:1-3) as well as linguistic and theological similarities between the two books, to substantiate their arguments. Another reason is the evidence in 1 Esdras, which records 2 Chronicles 35-36 and goes through Ezra without indicating any break between the narratives. Similarly, according to Breneman (1993:32), “the Jewish tradition found in the Talmud (Baba Bathra 15a),” supports the notion that 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah are the work of Ezra.

However, in the last twenty years, many Biblical scholars<sup>3</sup> seem to have come to a consensus that 1 and 2 Chronicles are the work of another author independent of Ezra and Nehemiah. Those who held this view proposed several reasons to support their arguments. Throntveit (1992:9) argued particularly against the supposed theological similarity by stating four major

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<sup>2</sup> For a list of some of the scholars who had advocated for this unity, see Breneman (1993:32-35), though he himself supports a separate authorship.

<sup>3</sup> Like Japhet (1968:371); Williamson (1985:xxi – xxiii); Breneman (1993:32-35); Dillard & Longman III (1994:180-181); Selman (1994); Richards (1995: 211-224) and Klein (1999:664).



theological differences. He explained that the emphasis of the Chronicler on David and his covenant is completely absent in Ezra-Nehemiah. Similarly, the Chronicler has ignored the exodus traditions which are very pervasive in Ezra-Nehemiah. In addition, the tolerant attitude to foreign marriages in 1 and 2 Chronicles is completely alien to Ezra-Nehemiah. Finally, the frequent use of the concept of retribution in Chronicles appears to be absent in Ezra-Nehemiah.

Similarly, Klein (1999:664) argued that the two works differ in their treatment of the Samaritans. According to him, the Chronicler is tolerant in his treatment of the Samaritans as opposed to the abhorrent attitude of Ezra-Nehemiah toward the same group. He also argued that the Chronicler made frequent references to the prophets but Ezra and Nehemiah seem to lay less emphasis on the role of the prophets. Moreover, the use of  $\sim ynlytiN>h;$  (the temple servants) and the 'sons of Solomon' are very pervasive in Ezra-Nehemiah (eg Ezr 2:40, 70; 8:20; Neh 7:73; 11:3-22), while the terms are almost completely absent in 1 and 2 Chronicles with the exception of 1 Chronicles 9:2. Another difference he reiterated was that according to Ezra-Nehemiah, Israel is limited to Judah and Benjamin while in Chronicles, Israel comprised of the twelve tribes.

Previously, Japhet (1968:331-371) had argued against the notion of common authorship. She explained that linguistic and theological similarities should be expected in both narratives because the writings seem to have fallen within the same period of time, the first century after the exile. She therefore saw no convincing reason to suggest that both works were written or edited by a single person or group. Similarly, the issue of linguistic similarities is disputed by Dillard and Longman III (1994:171) due to the fact that there are more linguistic dissimilarities than the linguistic commonalities in these works.

In view of the above mentioned reasons, I also support the view that the works have separate authors or editors. One should also bear in mind that the overlap at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra could be explained. For example, one of the authors may have read the work of the other and may have decided to incorporate it in his work in order to serve his theological or historical purpose or purposes (Kraemer 1993:91; Dillard & Longman III 1994:171).

In addition, the extensive use of the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah by the author or editor of 1 Esdras does not necessary mean the various works were previously one work. According to Dillard and Longman III (1994:171), many scholars view 1 Esdras as a secondary development rather

than having any unity with Ezra-Nehemiah. Thus, I have opted to choose that both works have separate authorship.

### 2.2.3 Composition, chronology and unity

A second issue that seems to be very difficult for scholars to resolve is the composition and chronological sequence of Ezra and Nehemiah (Japhet 1994:189-216; Richards 1995:211-224). This subject inevitably leads to the argument concerning the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah.

One of the basic questions is: should Ezra and Nehemiah be regarded as one work or two separate works? Some scholars<sup>4</sup> argue persuasively for the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah. According to them, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally regarded as one work. Also the Talmud proclaimed its unity (Williamson 1985:xxi; Breneman 1993:37). Moreover, this unity is also assumed by the Masoretes (Williamson 1985:xxi; Breneman 1993:37). The Masoretes<sup>5</sup> considered the two works as one by tallying the number of the verses of Ezra and Nehemiah as one book and by identifying Nehemiah 3:32 as the centre of the book. Similarly, the author of Ecclesiastes may have assumed this unity (Williamson 1985:xxi; Breneman 1993:37). Some early

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<sup>4</sup> Childs (1979: 635); Eskenazi (1988) and recently, Dillard & Longman III (1994:180-181) and Breneman (1993: 37) etc.

<sup>5</sup> Korpel and Oesch (2002: 121).

manuscripts of the Septuagint (LXX) as well as the Christian Canon of Melito of Sardis in the second century assumed the same unity (Williamson 1985:xxi; Breneman 1993:37). Ezra and Nehemiah were separated into two books during the Middle Ages. Origen was the first theologian to make this separation. Jerome acknowledged this separation in his Latin Vulgate (Dillard & Longman III 1994:180-181).

From a similar perception, Grabbe (1998b:94-96) identified several textual similarities that points to a single work. First, the identical list of returnees in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 according to him points to the unity of the books. He argued that this similarity was not a haphazard or accidental happening. It was one of the elements that were purposely designed to tie the works together.

Second, the mention of Ezra in Nehemiah 8 is invoked as another pointer to the unity of the two works. In elaborating on this, Grabbe (1998b:94) argued that the chronological sequence of the two works suggests that Ezra came before Nehemiah. But the occurrence of Ezra in the middle of the work of Nehemiah points to the unity of the books.

Third, Grabbe (1998b:94-95) also suggested that the abrupt ending of the book of Ezra presupposed a continuation of the narrative which would make the whole story a complete one. In view of this, Nehemiah picks up where Ezra had left and completes the remaining story.

Fourth, he (Grabbe1998b:95) pointed to the common themes in both works such as the return of the people from exile: In each case, it is the Persian king who does the sending through an official state decree; there was a threat to the community through intermarriage with the people of the land; and 'there is parallel structure from the two works.

While it may seem very difficult to dismiss the above arguments for the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah, others<sup>6</sup> have disagreed with the above conclusion and have argued in favour of a separate individual existence of the two books. One among those who argued vehemently against the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah is Kraemer (1993:74-75). He disagreed with the notion that the ancient believing community considered these works as a single book. According to him, it is one thing for the ancient community to accept the canonical arrangement of the works as a unity; it is quite another thing to consider the literary condition of these works at their inception. He made

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<sup>6</sup> Young (1964:378, 386); Harrison (1969:1150); Vanderkam (1992:55-75); Kraemer (1993:73-92); Japhet (1994:189- 216) and Klein (1999: 664).

reference to the fallacy in Eskenazi's view of the unity of the books by stating that Eskenazi has made a quick jump from Ezra to Nehemiah when he said both works were centred on the expansion of the house of God. Kraemer (1993:75) argued against that assertion and emphasized that the book of Ezra is about the rebuilding of the house of God but in Nehemiah this notion of rebuilding the house of God is peripheral. Nehemiah is about the rebuilding of Jerusalem, particularly its city walls.

Kraemer (1993:75-76) made other important observations in order to support his above mentioned claim. His observations are discussed in what follows. Firstly, he observed that the beginning of the book of Nehemiah clearly marks what follows as an independent composition. I suppose what Kraemer is asserting here can best be observed from the following two verses:

*Ezra 10:44: All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children.*

*Nehemiah 1:1: The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,<sup>7</sup>*

There is no evidence from the above two verses to suppose that there is a connection between the preceding passage in Ezra and the following one in Nehemiah. Ezra 10:44 is about the problem of intermarriage and the response to this situation. Nehemiah 1:1 introduced the words and the figure-

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<sup>7</sup> The quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1977).

Nehemiah who resides distant from Jerusalem. He obviously had no connection to the events of intermarriage in Jerusalem. This evidently suggests that the passage in Nehemiah has set out to provide its own distinctive narrative not the continuation of the narrative in Ezra as supposed by those who viewed these works as one.

Secondly, Kraemer (1993:75) observed that the repetition of the list in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 sustained the argument that these works were formerly independent from each other. If this was not the case, what was the purpose of such a repetition? Thirdly, he (Kraemer 1993:76) pointed that the occurrence of the work of Ezra in Nehemiah 8 underscores the argument that these works were composed separately. Fourthly, there are differences in styles. One difference is that Ezra is written in Hebrew and Aramaic while Nehemiah is written in the Hebrew language only (Kraemer 1993:76).

A last factor is that there are distinctive ideologies between these two works which suggest the independent nature of the material in question. According to Kraemer (1993:77), "the book of Ezra is a priestly book; its concerns are the Temple, the priesthood and Levites, and purity-that is, the cult." In contrast, the book of Nehemiah is a lay work. In some cases it is ambivalent

about the priestly concerns. In certain cases (Kraemer 1993:77) it supports the scribal values.

The issue of the literary connection between Ezra and Nehemiah also has been dismissed sharply by Japhet (1994:196-197). She argued that between Ezra 1-6 and Ezra 7-10, one may easily find a literary and stylistic unity, whereas in Nehemiah 1-13 there is no such unity. This could best be explained by recognizing the distinctive nature of these two works (Klein 1999:664).

This argument concerning the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah can further be understood in the context of issues like the composition and chronology as suggested by Japhet (1994:200-201). She recognized the issues of chronology and composition as some of the tantalizing phenomena facing the student of Ezra-Nehemiah. She reiterated that one of the major tasks of someone who is working on Ezra and Nehemiah is to determine the correct order of historical events in these books and to understand the author or editor's perception of history and chronology.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to reconstruct the chronological events of Ezra-Nehemiah, Hoppe (1986:281-286) uses the Septuagint (LXX), the Qumran



Scrolls, the Masoretic text and Cross<sup>8</sup> work on the Persian period to reconstruct the events in Ezra and Nehemiah during the Persian period. But despite its enormous promise, Hoppe's reconstruction is not left unquestioned. Mor (1977:57-67) also disagrees with Cross' addition of two names of priests apart from those listed in Ezra-Nehemiah.

However, Japhet's (1994:201) perception of the chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah seems to provide a good picture of what has taken place in Ezra-Nehemiah. In view of this, the following discussion will take an in-depth look at her observations. From the outset, Japhet (1994: 201) said that Ezra-Nehemiah describes a series of events and occasionally provides the readers with various chronological facts (eg Ezr 1:1; 3:8; 4:24; 5:13 etc), but such facts do not seem to be in line with an overall chronological sequence of the history of these events. Given this complexity, Japhet wondered whether it will be better if anyone wishing to sort out the chronological sequence of events in Ezra-Nehemiah "must do it on the basis of unsystematic comments scattered through the book, comparing them with extra-biblical information derived from various sources, primarily the kings of Persia." She quickly dismissed this method because it may lead any scholar to conclude that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah is "a historian devoid of any sense of structure or any consciousness of time, that is, not a historian at all" (Japhet 1994:207).

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<sup>8</sup> Cross (1966:201-211).

In view of the above, Japhet (1994:208) suggested that the best method to sort out issues of chronology and history is to examine the author's view of history and chronology on a historiographical-literary level. This might lead one to understand that the author had a very clear concept of time and history which provides the bedrock or framework for the structure of Ezra-Nehemiah. Japhet therefore provided her understanding of the structure and chronology that seemed to have guided the thought of the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Japhet (1994:208-209) asserted that Ezra-Nehemiah is structured in two main parts. The first part is Ezra 1-6. This period deals with Cyrus' decree in the first year of his reign and ends with the dedication of the Temple in the sixth year of the reign of Darius (Ezr 6:15). This period covered a span of twenty-two years, that is, from 538 BCE to 517 BCE.

The second part is Ezra 7- Nehemiah 13. This period deals with the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezr 7:7), and continues to the arrival and work of Nehemiah in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes (Neh 1:1; 2:1). This history ended in the thirty-third year of the reign of Artaxerxes (Neh 13:6-7). This period covered a span of twenty-six years, that is, from 458 BCE to 432 BCE.

There are certain similarities that Japhet (1994:208-214) has noted from the above periodization as can be observed in what follows. First, each of the periods lasts only one generation, that is, between twenty and thirty years. Second, in each of these periods, the people are led by two men. In the first period, Zerubbabel and Jeshua led the community; in the second period, Ezra and Nehemiah led the community. Third, the two periods are marked by the major projects. The rebuilding of the Temple marked the first period while the rebuilding of the city wall marked the second period. Japhet however acknowledged the complexities in the author's choice and organization of sources which were available to him/her. Notwithstanding, she explained the rationale behind the historiographical method and time sequence adopted by the author or editor of Ezra-Nehemiah by stating that the author(s) wanted to highlight this central fact that

“Change and renewal in the life of Judah were the result of initiative on the part of the Persian kings and the Jews of Babylonia, rather than any action in Judah itself, whether political or spiritual. God extended grace to Israel-that is, to those who returned from exile-by means of the kings of Persia” (Japhet 1994:216).

From the above explanation, Japhet (1994:216) asserted that in dealing with Ezra-Nehemiah, one must understand the chronological sequence of events as complementary to the composition of the sources even though they both differ from each other. In this regard, the author(s) or editor(s) of Ezra-Nehemiah had opted to deal with the two in their mutual relation in order to express their theological viewpoint. Today, the argument on the chronology of

events in Ezra-Nehemiah still seem to be hanging in the balance but evidently the weight of the argument appears to be in favour of the traditional view which Japhet has proposed above (cf Breneman 1993:42-46).

Another aspect concerns the sources that compose the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. Despite the divergence of views concerning the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah, there seem to be a general agreement by a number of scholars<sup>9</sup> on the sources that were used in the composition of Ezra and Nehemiah. Though, there are few differences on minor details. I will sketch on a general aspect, the sources, according to the various viewpoints of the scholars named above. The table below describes the sources.

*Table 1.* Sources that compose Ezra-Nehemiah

S/N	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
1	A historical review	Ezr 1-6
2	Ezra's memoirs	Ezr 7-10 and Neh 8-10 (NB: 9-10 is debated) <sup>10</sup>
3	Nehemiah's memoirs	Neh 1-7 and 11-13 (NB: 9-10 is debated)
4	Lists	Ezr 1:9-11; 2; 7; 8:1-14; Neh 3; 10:18-43; 11:3-36; 12:1-26
5	Letters	Ezr 1:2-4; 4:11-22; 5:7-17; 6:2-22; 7:12-26

<sup>9</sup> Grabbe (1998b:125- 182); Dillard & Longman III (1994:181); Japhet (1994:190) Breneman (1993:35-41); Williamson (1985:xxiii-xxxiii, 1987:14-36).

<sup>10</sup> See Breneman (1993:35, 38-40) and Clines (1984:4-9). There is debate among the above mentioned scholars concerning Nehemiah 8-10. A number of scholars agree that Nehemiah 8 belongs to Ezra memoirs. Other scholars like Williamson (1985:xxviii) include Nehemiah 9-10 in the Ezra memoirs. This matter has been left unresolved.

On a whole, the sources that are part of the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah have been broadly accepted among scholars as shown above. This exploration will therefore limit itself to these broad base contours of the sources.

#### 2.2.4 Date and Authorship

Our reflection on the subject matter of composition and chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah has led to the awareness that one sentence may not accurately describe the process that these works went through to the final stage. This is to highlight the fact that there were a number of sources that composed the books. Consequently, it is difficult to explain the exact thing that happened in the process of compiling the various sources to form a single unit. In view of this complexity, scholars<sup>11</sup> have found it difficult to name the date(s) and author(s) of Ezra-Nehemiah with precision. Nonetheless, they have conjectured on some possible dates for the final editing of the works and the probable author(s). In the following, we have sketched briefly some of the various conjectures concerning the date and authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah.

According to Clines (1984:12-14) the issue of dating Ezra-Nehemiah cannot be divorced from the issue of the relationship between the books and 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as the issues of authorship and sources of Ezra-

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<sup>11</sup>Clines (1984:12-14); Williamson (1987: 45-46); Dillard and Longman III (1994:181-182) and Klein (1999: 664-665).

Nehemiah. This is due to several reasons. An important reason is that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as Ezra-Nehemiah is viewed by other scholars (see the section for the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah to 1 and 2 Chronicles paragraph one for a list of such scholars) to have been Ezra the priest, his associate, his student or the unknown Chronicler. Whoever the person might be, he/she was responsible for all the above mentioned works.

Another reason is that Ezra and Nehemiah share certain theological, literary and historical features with 1 and 2 Chronicles. Both works are post-exilic material. Given this tie, it is more logical to discuss the issue of dating Ezra and Nehemiah within the context or framework of the authorial and compositional work of both texts. Apparently, if this suggestion is followed consistently, it may turn this discussion back to the issues that have been dealt with in the previous sections and as such will inevitably become a circular argument. Consequently, this section will limit itself to the probable suggestions on date and authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Considering the internal textual evidences from Ezra-Nehemiah, some scholars<sup>12</sup> have conjectured that Ezra-Nehemiah can be dated between 450 BCE and 350 BCE (though this is not without question. Cf. Williamson 1985:xxxvi; Throntveit 1992:10-11). This is based on the assumption that

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<sup>12</sup> Clines (1884:14); Williamson (1987:45-46); Breneman (1993:41) and Klein (1999:664-665).

there is no strong indication in the text of Ezra and Nehemiah which may suggest an earlier or a later date to the period they have suggested above. From their perspective, all the events that have been reported in Ezra and Nehemiah are assumed to have happened between 539 BCE and 400 BCE. This proposal also is based on the assumption that Ezra or his associate may have been the final author(s) or editor(s).

Previously, we learned that scholars have a relative consensus on the sources (see table 1 on page 34) that are part of the composition of Ezra and Nehemiah. It was obvious that much of the sources were derived from Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs. Some of the lists were found from previous records. Whoever was the final editor(s), the person(s) may have gathered these pre-existing memoirs, lists, letters etcetera and may have put them together. The most probable person(s) could have been Ezra or Nehemiah with their associates, the Chronicler or both, etcetera. The researcher does not have a contrary opinion to the date and authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah as already suggested by the above named scholars<sup>13</sup>. So, this research also assumes that the final editorial work on Ezra-Nehemiah may have happened between 450 BCE and 350 BCE, under the auspices of the assumed author(s) or editor(s). This assumption is based on the internal textual evidence as

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<sup>13</sup> Clines (1984:14); Williamson (1987:45-46); Breneman (1993:41) and Klein (1999:664-665).

already suggested by the above named scholars. There is no specific event in Ezra or Nehemiah that might have pointed to the contrary suggestion.

### 2.2.5 Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah

There is no question that the theology of Ezra-Nehemiah is so divergent that it can hardly be summarized in a single sentence (Williamson 1985:xlvi). In view of this complexity, a number of scholars<sup>14</sup> have speculated on what is the core theology of Ezra-Nehemiah. Obviously, their perception of this theology varies from one aspect to the other. In an attempt to discern these trajectories, here follow some of the major themes that have been suggested by scholars as the contours of the theology of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Eskenazi (1988:1) discerned three theological trajectories that have been transformed from the pre-exilic period to the post-exilic era in Ezra-Nehemiah. He saw a movement from the time of elite leaders to a time of community (post-exilic returning Jews); a time of narrow holiness to a time of encompassing holiness; and a time of oral authority to a time of the authority of written documents (cf. Dillard and Longman III 1994:186). Eskenazi (1988:1) explained that in the first circumstance, the Old Testament was

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<sup>14</sup> Clines (1984:25-31); Eskenazi (1988:1); Breneman (1993: 50-58); Green (1993); Kraemer (1993: 83-90) and Klein (1999:668-671).



previously concerned with individuals such as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David and Daniel etcetera. The community of the pre-exilic Israel was not so central. However, in the post-exilic period, particularly in Ezra-Nehemiah the text is concerned with the returning Jewish community as a whole. The community had taken precedent over individual figures. It is the community that rebuilds the altar, the temple and the wall. It is the community who requested the Law to be read to their hearing.

Second, the concept of holiness is no longer restricted to a single place, possibly the temple; rather, it is extended to include the city and its wall as well as the community as a whole. This explains why the altar, the temple and the city wall were consecrated when they were completed. In the end, we have a holy people dwelling in a holy city with a holy God.

Third, there is a shift from oral authority to written documents in Ezra-Nehemiah. It is so astounding to see how written documents such as letters, edicts, law codes et cetera. controlled and drove the political, economic, religious and social landscape of this post-exilic community. The kings of Persia initiated the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the temple and the city wall through written edicts and letters. Ezra and Nehemiah rallied the community to become a united political and religious force by re-interpreting

and re-applying the written documents especially the Law of their God in order to address their present circumstances (cf Breneman 1993:52-53).

On the contrary, Green (1993:206-215 cf Dillard and Longman III 1994:187) sees Ezra-Nehemiah as a theology of the rebuilding of two walls-the religious and the physical walls. On the one hand, physically, Nehemiah's wall separates the holy people of God from the unclean gentiles who are also their enemies. On the other hand, Ezra's wall is the Law of God. Ezra is commanded to teach the people of God this law. This law of God inevitably excludes the gentiles and those who were unclean from associating with the holy people of God (cf Breneman 1993:51-52).

Breneman (1993:50-58) viewed Ezra –Nehemiah as having a number of theological trajectories. Some of the themes include those that have already been named above. Those that have not been discussed includes emphasis on the continuity of God's plan and the people; the centrality of worship and prayer; and a narration of God's active participation in the history of the world, shaping it to His desired goal.

Regarding the issue of continuity, Breneman (1993:50) explained that one of the major theological objectives of Ezra-Nehemiah is to show that there is

continuity between Israel's past history and the present. Ezra-Nehemiah showed that institutions such as the temple, the altar, the wall, the celebration of the Passover, the feast of tabernacles etcetera were representatives of the previous pre-exilic institutions of Israel. So, the existences of such institutions in the post-exilic period sustained continuity of the past (cf Clines 1984:25).

Another theological trajectory in Ezra-Nehemiah is the centrality of religious worship and prayer (cf Clines 1984:29). The rebuilding of the altar and the temple were specifically meant for religious worship and prayer. Sacrifices were offered on the altar to God. The returned community celebrated the Passover, the feast of tabernacles and the reading of the law as a religious experience. Similarly, prayer was at the heart of the ministry of Ezra (Ezr 9) and Nehemiah (Neh 9). Both leaders started their journey with prayer and sustained their mission with prayer. Clines (1984:30) observes that all these religious experiences were done for the glory of God. They were not meant to be an end in themselves. The goal was to glorify God in all things, hence the phrase: "we will not neglect the house of our God" (Neh 10:39).

Breneman (1993:54-55) also highlights the theological concept that God actively participates in the history of the world. He reiterates that Ezra-Nehemiah has shown that history is not a combination of meaningless,

isolated events. Rather, it is God who actively controls history to His desired goal for the salvation of His people. Similarly, God controlled the history of such kingdoms as Babylon and Persia to accomplish His purpose for disciplining and restoring His people, Israel.

Kraemer (1993:83-90) also proposes some other motifs that seem to underlie the books of Ezra and Nehemiah but those motifs are subsumed in the trajectories that have already been discussed above. Mention is made of the concept of crying, opposition, intermarriage, covenant, sin and punishment, and Torah. Kraemer argues that these concepts are very pervasive in Ezra-Nehemiah; as a result, they contribute immensely to the establishment and restoration of the religious and social life of the post-exilic-community. This study will not elaborate on these concepts in detail but will discuss specifically the relationship between Jews and foreigners in the post-exilic period.

## 2. 2. 6 Relationship between Jews and foreigners

One concern that has defined the point of departure of this investigation is the relationship between Jews and foreigners concerning their religious life and communal living during the post-exilic period. One aspect of this relationship is the rationale for the prohibition against intermarriage in Ezra and Nehemiah. Concerning this feature, some scholars (Wolfendale 1974:143-

144; Clines 1984:116-118; Klein 1999:732-733) assert that intermarriage prohibition in Ezra and Nehemiah was motivated by the concern to protect the monotheistic character of Judaism against the powerful syncretistic polytheism that was prevalent during the Persian period.

On the contrary, other scholars such as Williamson (1985:1-11; cf Maccoby 1996:156-157, though Maccoby himself shares an opposite view) disagreed with the above perception. Instead, they argued that the prohibition was motivated by Jewish racial prejudice. Maccoby (1996:156-157) clearly refuted this accusation on the ground that racism is based on racial superiority; supposedly, there is no trace in Israel's history which indicates that the Jews were a superior race.

Nonetheless, a contrary perception seems to underlie Williamson's (1985:1-11) thought during his discussion on the theological message of Ezra-Nehemiah. Williamson observed that race and religion characterized this post-exilic Jewish community rather than nationality. According to him, "the Jewish community is urged to observe a strict program of separation in order to maintain its identity...[This] is found in each of the four great sections of these books, and is the source of much of the opposition which the people faced" (Williamson 1985:1-11). With this firm conviction, Williamson concludes

his argument by stating that it is difficult to dismiss the proposition that the post-exilic Jews saw themselves as racially different from its neighbours. Ezra misapplied the concept of the seed of Abraham-the elect (holy people) of God (not for their racial superiority) to be a blessing for other nations (Gn 12:3, 7; Dt 7:6-7), but he has turned this to racial prejudice (Williamson 1985:132).

Consequently, Stahl (1988:107-111) was careful not to side with any of the above views. To this effect, he explains that there is ambivalence about intermarriage in biblical texts. As such, one cannot say a definitive word about intermarriage between Jews and foreigners (cf Grabbe 1998a). He cited a couple of Israel's figures who had married foreign women. Joseph, Moses, David, and Esther (who got married to a Persian king) had interracial marriages. This suggests to him that there was a permissive attitude in previous generations in Israel until the time of Ezra- Nehemiah.

A second aspect that concerns the relationship between Jews and foreigners is the conclusion reached by Eskenazi and Judd (1994:266-285) concerning the women in Ezra 9-10. They researched the sociological and theological classification of the strange women in Ezra 9-10. Their findings seem to suggest that the women classified in Ezra 9-10 as strangers were not really strangers as others may have supposed. According to them, these women may have been Judahites or some of the Israelites who had never gone to

exile. So, it may have happened that the early returnees saw them as appropriate marriage partners. This assumption is also sustained by the fact that Ezra 9:1-2 does not recognize these women as Ammonites or Canaanites because they were not. On the contrary, the notion of redefining the identity of true Israelites made them to be considered as foreigners. As a result, they were unjustly excluded from the post-exilic community (Eskenazi and Judd 1994:285).

A third issue concerns the relationship of Jews to the Samaritans. Cogan (1988:286- 292) pointed out that what is found in Ezra-Nehemiah concerning the Samaritans is different from what is in Chronicles. According to him, Ezra-Nehemiah is a report of the *Golah* community, who were struggling to re-establish their cultic life in Jerusalem. This group literally advocated separation from foreigners and encouraged purity of the post-exilic community. The audience of the Chronicles was very open and receptive to non-Jews. They were willing to integrate with the non-Israelites in their communal living and religious life, particularly, in the worship of the God of Israel.

#### 2.2.7. Other issues

There are a few other minor issues that have concerned scholars in the study of Ezra-Nehemiah but these are not at the core of their discussions, hence,

this research will just mention them in passing. Klein (1999:667) has mentioned and discussed such issues as we may observe in what follows.

The first matter is the relationship between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel. Who are these people? Do the names refer to one person or to separate individuals? The second concern is the establishment of Judah as an independent state. Was Judah an independent state prior to the arrival of Nehemiah or was it under the auspices of the state of Samaria? The third subject is the book of the law mentioned in Nehemiah 8. Is this law book similar to the present canonical Pentateuch? Is it the P source, the book Deuteronomy, an unidentified law book or is it a lost book? The fourth issue concern the original owners of the land of Judah. Evidence from Ezra-Nehemiah suggests that the land belonged to the *Golah* (exile) community who had returned to Judah. Those who had remained in the land during the exile seem to have been ignored. The question is “who owns the land”, the exiles or the non-exiles? On what basis were those who remained in the land during the exile considered as foreigners?

Of course, the above mentioned subjects cannot be easily brushed away in a study of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. Nevertheless, the scope of this present research is very limited so the researcher has opted to just mention these issues without in-depth discussion or analysis of any of them.



## **2. 3 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it seems apparent from the overall preceding discussions that there are diversities of opinions among scholars concerning the identity of foreigners in the early post-exilic period. The question, "Who is a foreigner?" can produce differing answers, just as the question, "who is a Jew during this period?" will do the same. Similarly, the relationship between the early post-exilic Jewish community and non-Jews can hardly be determined with certainty nor defined in a single sentence. It is also very difficult to point out specifically the theological assumptions that under-girded the response of Ezra and Nehemiah concerning the religious life and communal living of the returning Jews and others.

In view of the above mentioned difficulties, this study will therefore attempt to clarify the identity of foreigners during the early post-exilic period as documented in Ezra and Nehemiah. This study also attempts to show the specific nature of the relationship between the early post-exilic Jewish community and non-Jews in Ezra and Nehemiah. Finally, attempts will also be made to uncover Ezra and Nehemiah's theological presuppositions that led to the manner in which the returning exiles related to other residents of the region. Connections will be sought between the events in Ezra and Nehemiah and the covenant promises God made with Abraham and his descendants concerning the blessing of other nations.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONTEXT, NATURE AND MEANING OF ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the literary context, nature and meaning of God's covenant with Abraham.<sup>1</sup> References are also made to the subsequent renewals of the Abrahamic covenant promise(s)<sup>2</sup> with Isaac and Jacob. Part of the section also relates the covenant promise(s) God made to Abraham (and his descendants) with certain events that have occurred in Ezra and Nehemiah.

One of the reasons for choosing the Abrahamic covenant is that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah seem to appeal to Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants<sup>3</sup> as the basis for the legitimacy of the returning exiles to the land of Judah as well as for their religious and marital separation from foreigners. The appeal to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant promises as the basis for the legitimacy of

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<sup>1</sup> Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-27.

<sup>2</sup> Gn 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

<sup>3</sup> Nehemiah 9:7-21 refers to both Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. Moreover, Ezra 9:1-15 and Nehemiah 1:5-10 seem to refer to the Mosaic covenant. The connection between the Mosaic and the Abrahamic covenants is that the Mosaic covenant presupposes the Abrahamic covenant. In other words, Mosaic covenant appeal to Abrahamic covenant as its basis or foundation (e.g. Ex 2:24; 3:16-17; 6:2-9; Dt 1:8; 6:10-12; 10:12-22; 30:19-20). Because of that foundational link, the appeal from Ezra and Nehemiah to the Mosaic covenant may also be considered as an appeal to the Abrahamic covenant. Another link between these two covenants is that it is one God who administers both covenants. So, the appeal made from Ezra 9:1-15 and Nehemiah 1:5-10 to the Mosaic covenant logically include Abrahamic covenant as well.

the returning exiles to the land appear legitimate since certain allusions from the book of Genesis<sup>4</sup> seem to testify to such a connection. A second reason for choosing the Abrahamic covenant is that it is the basis on which the Mosaic covenant is founded. Abrahamic covenants anticipate the Mosaic covenant (Gn 17:7-8).

Apparently, Ezra and Nehemiah appear to be very polemic toward foreigners concerning marriage, worship and communal relationship.<sup>5</sup> My investigation of the Abrahamic covenant<sup>6</sup> however, aims to reveal that foreigners ought to relate with Abram/Abraham and his descendants through appropriate covenant stipulations.<sup>7</sup> Through appropriate covenant means, Abraham and his descendants are seen to be a channel through which God will also bless other nations.

In view of the connection between Abrahamic covenant promises and certain events in Ezra and Nehemiah, in this chapter I will examine the Abrahamic covenant and certain events in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning foreigners.

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<sup>4</sup> The book of Genesis is colored with God's promises to Abraham and his descendants concerning the inheritance of the land of Canaan (cf. Gn 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-18; 15:7-21; 17:8; 22:17; 26:3-5; 28:13-15; 47:29-31; 48:21-22; 49:29-32; 50:12-14, 24-25).

<sup>5</sup> Ezr 4:1-3; 9:1-10:44; Neh 2:20; 4:1-23; 6:1-7:3; 10:30; 13:1-31.

<sup>6</sup> Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-27

<sup>7</sup> Gn 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14 "Through you/your seed all nations will be blessed/shall receive blessing/shall bless themselves." No matter how one understands this recurrent phrase, the common denominator is that other nations would have to relate with Abraham or his descendants /seed in order that they might be blessed, bless themselves or receive blessings from God.

The chapter will explore how the Abrahamic covenant appears to set the stage for the relationship between foreigners and Abraham's descendants. Consequently, certain passages in Ezra and Nehemiah<sup>8</sup> seem to presuppose or hint on this relationship.

### 3. 2. LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

#### 3.2.1 Introduction

No passage in Scripture is isolated. Every verse occurs in the context of a larger framework of other verses. Because of this inseparable link of scriptural passages, it is very important to read a particular passage in light of its larger context in order to have a full grasp of what the smaller building stone-passages are all about (Gorman 2001:69). This principle leads this study to evaluate the context of the covenant God made with Abraham<sup>9</sup> in order to see how the covenant fits into Genesis as a whole.

#### 3.2.2 Structure of Genesis

The structure of the book of Genesis has been described in several ways.<sup>10</sup>

The proposed structures for the book of Genesis must be significantly

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<sup>8</sup> Ezr 9:10-14; Neh 1:5-9; 9:7-21.

<sup>9</sup> Gn 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-27.

<sup>10</sup> Wenham (1987:xxi-xxii); Dillard and Longman III (1994:48); Matthews (1996:26-41). These scholars have proposed two possible structures for the book of Genesis. The first structure is *tdol.AT hL,ae* that appeared at several points in Genesis. The second structure is

appreciated. The two structures, to a great extent, capture various aspects of the story of Genesis. Nonetheless, since the book of Genesis is a vast arena, its structure can be seen in different ways by different scholars. Consequently, my careful reading of the book of Genesis reveals a structure which is slightly different from those that have been cited above.

My observation reveals that the book of Genesis has two major parts. The first part is Genesis 1:1- 7:24; while the second part is Genesis 8:1-50:26. Each part echoes four major themes. The subject matters in each part include creation or recreation, blessing, sin and God's response. In each of the two parts, every event or narrative has fallen in one of the four named categories. The following two diagrams describe the structure of the book of Genesis. The first diagram (Table 2) describes a summary structure of the whole book while the second diagram (Table 3) describes an expanded structure of the book of Genesis.<sup>11</sup>

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divided into two sections: (1) Primeval History (Gn 1:1-11:32), and (2) Patriarchal narratives (Gn 12:1-50:26).

<sup>11</sup> The structure of the book of Genesis is not strictly chronological especially the first eleven chapters of Genesis. It appears that the author(s) or editor(s) is not so much akin to arranging his/her material in a strict chronological order. He/she is more concerned with narrating the stories about creation/recreation, blessing, sin and God's response. This is not to suggest that the author(s) or editor(s) is completely disinterested in chronology. Obviously, the author(s) or editor(s) has arranged some of the narratives from Genesis 12:1- 50:26 in a more chronological order. It is just that chronology is not used at the expense of the stories themselves.

Table 2. Summary structure of the book of Genesis

S/N	GENESIS 1:1-7:24	THEMES	GENESIS 8:1-50:26
1	1:1-27	Creation/Recreation	8:1-20
2	1:28-2:25;4:25-5:32	Blessing	8:21-9:19
3	3:1-13;4:1-24; 6:1-6	Sin	9:20-11:7
4	3:14-24;6:7-7:24	God's response	11:8-50:26 <sup>12</sup>

Table 3. Expanded structure of the book of Genesis

N	PART 1 (GN 1:1-7:24)	THEMES	PART 2 (GN 8:1-50:26)	N
1	<b>Creation</b>	GOD CREATE	<b>Recreation</b>	1
	God created 1:1	Process	God remembered <sup>13</sup> 8:1	
	Water/deep 1:2, 6-10	water	Water/ deep/flood 8:1-5	
	Heaven/ Earth 1:1	universe	Heaven/Earth 8:1-3	
	Livestock 1:20-25	creatures	Livestock 1:1,15-17, 19	
	Sun,moon,stars 1:3-5, 14-19	Luminaries	Sun, moon & stars 8:22	
	Adam ,Eve 1:26-27	humankind	Noah &family 8:1, 15-16, 18	
	God's image 1:27-27	Nature of man	God's image 9:6b	
2	<b>Blessing</b>	GOD BLESSES	<b>Blessing</b>	2
	Fruitfulness 1:28	Fruitfulness	Fruitfulness 8:22; 9:1,7	
	Rulership 1:28; 2:15	Rulership	Rulership 9:2	

<sup>12</sup> This section has a mixture of the three themes: sin, blessing and God's response. Sin aspect narrates the stories about the weaknesses/failures of humankind. Blessing aspect deals with God's blessing on humankind after the fall of Babel. The blessing includes fruitfulness/child bearing, material wealth and acquisition of land and property. God's response in one sense is His conferment of particular blessing to all the nations through Abraham and his descendants. God's response in this regard specifically relates to covenant promises and activities that include but also transcend Israel as a nation. God looks forward to Abram, his descendants and other nations as the parameters of His response.

<sup>13</sup> The word *remember* ( $\sim yhil\{a/ rKoz>YIw\}$ ), with reference to God as the subject, almost always denotes God's active response to an external situation (eg Gn 19:29; Ex 2:24; 1 Sm 1:19; Ps 105:42). So, the phrase "God remembered Noah and His creatures" in Genesis 8:1 may in a sense be regarded as God's active way of calling (recreating) Noah and other creatures into existence after the flood.

	Food 1:29-30; 2:16	Food	Food 9:3	
3	<b>Sin</b>	SIN	<b>Sin</b>	3
	Sin anticipated 2:17	Sin anticipated	Sin anticipated 8:21;	
	Adam & Eve ate 3:6	Ate, drank, built	Drank 9:21; built Babel 11:4	
	Nakedness 3:7	1 <sup>st</sup> consequence	Nakedness 9:21-22	
	Fig leaves 3:7	Human effort	Garment 9:23	
4	<b>God's response</b>	RESPONSE	<b>God's response</b>	4
	God appeared quickly 3:8	God appeared	God appeared later 11:5	
	Garment 3:21	cover	Human used God's example <sup>14</sup>	
	Man separated from garden	Separation	Later man separated from	
	and from God 3:23		tower and from God 11:8-9	
	Promise of victory 3:15	Promise	Promise of blessing 12:1-3	
	Short term response to sin	Time frame	Long term response to sin	
	through Noah 6:1-7:24		through Abram 12:1-50:26	

### 3.2.3 Movement of the narrative

The movement of the narratives in Genesis as portrayed in the above structure may be described in each part (Part 1: Gn 1:1- 7:24 and Part 2: Gn 8:1-50:26) as follows. In part one, God created the universe including humankind (Gn 1:1-2:25). God blessed them and all other things He had made as noted in the first two chapters of Genesis. There is a close relationship between God and mankind because He made them in His image and likeness (Gn 1:26-27; Walton & Matthews 1997:18). God made humankind vicegerent on earth (Gn 1:28-30; 2:15-17). As vicegerent, they

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<sup>14</sup> Compare Gn 3:21 with 9:23.

must do God's will on earth and live in good relationship with their creator including other creatures.

Unfortunately, human beings failed, by disobeying (sinned against) God (Gn 3:6-7). God responded in several ways toward mankind and His creation. First, human beings were separated from God<sup>15</sup>. Second, God pronounced a curse/enmity between the serpent and the woman as well as between their seed (Gn 3:15). This verse may be understood as a curse as well as a promise of victory, superiority of mankind against the serpent or various sources of temptations (see Fretheim 1994:363; Robertson 1980:96-97)<sup>16</sup>. But because of the pervasive nature of human sin (Gn 4:1-24; 6:1-8), God almost erased mankind and other creatures completely from the face of the earth (Gn 7:21-24). God however spared Noah, his family and few creatures out of every kind in order to have a renewed creation.

In part two, Noah, his family and few other creatures begin a new life (recreation: Gn 8:1-20). Human beings were reminded once again about their close relationship with God. They are made in God's image and likeness (Gn

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<sup>15</sup> This separation is considered by other scholars as death (Cf. Fretheim 1994:364, 369 with Gn 3:19, 23-24). When human beings are separated from God, they are by implication severed from their source of life and existence.

<sup>16</sup> There are differing views concerning the identity of the serpent in this text. The serpent is Satan in disguise; the serpent symbolizes human curiosity; the serpent is a mythological figure for prosperity, life and death, chaos, demon or God's enemy; the serpent is an animal that is clever (see Westermann 1984:237). Based upon several biblical passages (e.g. Is 27:1; 2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9; 20:2), this study assumes that the serpent is used in Genesis 3 to symbolize the devil (Satan), who is opposed to God.



9:6). They are blessed by God (Gn 9:1). They are also reminded of their vicegerent role (Gn 9:2-3). They are expected to live in obedience to God and in good relationship with their fellow beings as well as the rest of the other creatures (Gn 9:4-17).

Regrettably, humankind disobeyed (sinned against) God (Gn 9:21-23; 11:3-4) as they had done in the previous part. God responded in almost the same ways as He did at first. Mankind is separated from God (Gn 11:8). God initiated a process through which He would renew His relationship with humankind through Abram (Gn 12:1-3; cf. Fretheim 1994:425-426). The covenant between God and Abram/Abraham (Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27) may therefore be understood as God's renewed response toward mankind in order to restore the relationship that had existed between God and humankind including other creatures before the fall (cf. Fretheim 1996:85; Soggin 2001:55).

Through God's relationship with Abraham, He will bless them and restore them to their vicegerent role (Gn 12:1-3). The events that follow the covenant God made with Abraham may be understood in two ways. Some events narrate an advancement of the Abrahamic covenant promises<sup>17</sup> while other

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<sup>17</sup> The birth of Isaac, a legitimate son of Abraham (Gn 21:1-7), indicates an advancement in the covenant promises God made to Abraham (cf. Gn 15:4-6; 17:16-19).

events seem to derail the covenant promises from being realised<sup>18</sup>. Despite the occurrence of positive and negative events concerning the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant promises, Genesis (Gn 50:19-21,24-25) tells its readers that Yahweh, the God of Israel was successfully guiding and controlling the events and the covenant promises He made to Abraham and his descendants to His intended destination.

### **3.3 NATURE AND CONTENT OF COVENANT<sup>19</sup>**

#### **3.3.1 Introduction**

In what follows, the nature or content of a covenant is explained. This includes particular characteristics of a so called Ancient Near Eastern treaty or agreement among the Ancient Near Eastern people. I have attempted to identify the constituent elements of and the goal for making a covenant. This task is very difficult because of two reasons. Firstly, the term *tyrIB*. is very elastic. It is somehow difficult to explain the original Hebrew meaning (Robertson 1980:3-4; Gottwald 1987:202). Secondly, the scope of this research is too limited to offer an exhaustive discussion on certain terms. Given these two concerns, I have not provided an in depth discussion on the term *tyrIB*.. However, I have discussed briefly the nature and content of

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<sup>18</sup> God tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his only son Isaac (Gn 22:1-12). This event almost brought tension to God's covenant promise (Gn 15:4-6; 17:16-19).

<sup>19</sup> Specific texts that deal with the covenant God made with Abraham include Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27.

*tyrIB.* (covenant) in the context of the Ancient Near Eastern people. The Ancient Near Eastern region is culturally associated with biblical Israel. These worlds form the socio-cultural background to the book of Genesis (Walton & Matthews 1997:12-13).

### 3.3.2 Nature and content of covenant

#### 3.3.2.1 Definition

The term *tyrIB.* (*berit*) has been defined as:

“a formal, solemn, and binding agreement between parties in which there are obligations to do certain acts, or to refrain from doing them, and there are promises or threats of consequences that will follow on fulfilment or breach of the obligations” (Gottwald 1987:202).

Gottwald (1987:202) argued that the above definition does not necessary capture the full meaning of the Hebrew term *berit*. In view of this limitation, he immediately suggests certain terms that capture some aspects of the Hebrew word *berit* (covenant). These terms include descriptions like agreement, arrangement, compact, contract, commitment, treaty, alliance, obligation, bond and relationship (cf. Human 1983:142).

Similarly, Robertson (1980:4-5) sees the biblical *berit* as capturing varied aspects. Following from that recognition, he defined *berit* as a “bond in blood sovereignly administered.” He argued that a covenant is a bond in blood

because it involves life and death. It is also sovereignly administered by the higher party. In terms of Israel, God administered it sovereignly. In as much as it is sovereignly administered by the higher party, its goal is to establish a binding relationship between two or more parties. Such relationship has to be acceptable to both the sovereign and the lesser parties.

Certain basic characteristics of a covenant can be seen from the Ancient Near Eastern treaty given by Soulen and Soulen (2001:200)<sup>20</sup>. These include:

- i). Introduction of the speaker;
- ii). Historical explanation of past relations;
- iii). Obligations of the vassal party are spelled out;
- iv). Statement showing the necessity of keeping the agreement and regular public reading of it;
- v). Naming of the witnesses to the treaty;
- vi). Pronouncement of curse and blessing.

### 3.3.2.2 Content of Abrahamic Covenant (Gn 15:1-21; 17:127)

The relationship between the covenant texts of Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:1-27 is that the passages complement each other (Adar 1990:66; Rogerson, Moberly and Johnstone 2001:112). Genesis 15 does not fully describe the content of God's covenant with Abram/Abraham<sup>21</sup>. Chapter 17 provides additional elements of the content of the covenant which were lacking in

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<sup>20</sup> Soulen and Soulen (2001:200) derived the above example from a covenant Treaty of the Hittite empire.

<sup>21</sup> I have used the names Abram and Abraham interchangeably in discussing the Abrahamic covenant passages. The reason for using the names interchangeably is that the text of Genesis uses the name Abram up to chapter 17. Abram's name finally changes to Abraham in chapter 17:5.

chapter 15.<sup>22</sup> In view of this complementary relationship, I will consider the two covenant texts as a unit<sup>23</sup>.

In what follows, I will discuss the Abrahamic *berit*<sup>24</sup> (covenant) in relation to the characteristics found in the above named Ancient Near Eastern treaty form. The reason for discussing this covenant form and that of the Hittite covenant formula is that both covenant formulas share certain features in common, as might be observed in the following discussion.

#### 3.3.2.2.1 Introduction of the speaker (Gn 15:1; 17:1).

In the normal Ancient Near East treaty, the higher party introduces himself/herself to the lower (vassal) party. In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, God (who is the higher party) introduces Himself to

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<sup>22</sup> Read a detail explanation on the complementary relationship of the two passages in the next two foot notes.

<sup>23</sup> I do know that the two covenant texts are considered as originating from separate sources. There appears to be no consensus on the source of Chapter 15. Meanwhile, chapter 17 is considered as P Source (Brueggemann 1982:153; Westermann 1985:214-217, 256-257; Fretheim 1994:444, 457). However, I have decided to take the two passages as a unit here because I am dealing with Abrahamic covenant as a whole. Both texts talk about Abrahamic covenant.

<sup>24</sup> The *berit* between God and Abram/Abraham takes place in Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27. These two covenant passages complement each other in the following ways. One way is that the first passage (Gn 15:1-21) anticipates the second passage (Gn 17:1-27). The covenant was made with Abram but the obligations for Abram were not spelled out in the first passage (Brett 2000:62), rather his obligations were spelled out in the second passage (Gn 17:1, 9-14). A second complementary indication of the two covenant passages is that the second passage (Gn 17:1-27) predicates the first passage. Chapter 17 is a confirmation (cf. 17:2) of chapter 15. Another complementary factor is Abram and Sarai's name change. Abram and Sarai's name change occur in the context of the confirmation of the covenant. The name change did not happen in the first covenant passage (Gn 15:1-21). The name change that takes place in the second covenant passage complements the lack of it in the previous covenant text.

Abram/Abraham (the lower party) in the first verse of each chapter that deals specifically with the Abrahamic covenant (Gn 15:1; 17:1). In chapter 15:1, God began a formal introduction of Himself to Abram by cautioning him about fear. One reason God might have started with an introductory statement of caution to Abram concerning fear might be that He appeared to Abram here in a vision<sup>25</sup>. But prior to Genesis 15:1, God had appeared to Abram without any specific indication of the mode of His appearance.

A second reason for what is suggested by Speiser (1990:115) who argued that the promises God made to Abram according to Genesis 12:1-3 seem to hinge upon Abraham's descendants. However, Abraham did not have a child up to the point of chapter 15. This might have been heart breaking for Abram (cf. Ross 1988:308) because among the Ancient Near Eastern people, a son was responsible for burying his father after he has died and then inheriting his father's property. Since Abraham had no legitimate children up to this point, he may have been very worried or anxious about the lack of a child to succeed him (cf. Adar 1990:60; Walton & Matthews 1997:35).

A third reason for the caution might be that the story preceding Genesis 15:1 suggests that Abram fought and rescued his relative Lot from the hands of their enemies. So, Abram might have had ill feeling about this previous

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<sup>25</sup> Adar (1990:60) argued that 'vision' is a world of mystery. It is totally different from our mundane world. God's appearance to Abram here in a vision is not visible to the eyes of Abram but audible to his ears.

experience (Ross1988:308). In view of Abram's inner feelings or anxiety, he might have needed God's assurance and a level of certainty about the one who was talking to Him. God is not Abram's enemy. He does not appear to create trouble for Abram nor his relative Lot; rather, God's intention is to establish a cordial relationship with Abram. He is declaring that He is Abram's shield (!gEm') and his very great reward (daom. hBer>h; ^r>k'f.).

The terms shield and reward are figurative or metaphorical speech probably suggesting protection and provision (Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:210; Ross 1988:308).

According to chapter 17:1, God introduces himself as 'God Almighty' (yD;v; lae-ynIa]). This introduction also denotes God's repeated assurance to Abram. God is sovereign, powerful, mighty and probably a mountain<sup>26</sup> (Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:222-223; Ross 1988:330; Fretheim 1994:458; Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone 2001:109). God's power, sovereignty, and completeness show that He is dependable and trustworthy. Based on God's nature and character, Abram could be assured that God's covenant relationship (tyrIB.) with him is dependable and trustworthy.

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<sup>26</sup> The interpretation of the name *el-shaddai* to mean probably 'mountain' is a conjecture.

#### 3.3.2.2.2 Historical explanation of past relations (Gn 15:7)

Another characteristic in the Ancient Near East treaty is the historical explanation of the past relation between the higher party and the vassal. With regard to the Abrahamic covenant, God explains His past relationship with Abram in Genesis 15:7. According to the passage, God informs Abram that He was the one who brought Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans, though Genesis 11:31-32 seems to suggest that Abram moved from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan through the initiative of his father Terah. The above passage also appears to say that it was after the death of his father Terah (in Haran, on their way to Canaan), that God appeared to Abram and called him to leave his country (Gn 12:1). Should we say that Terah and his family moved from Ur (of the Chaldeans) to go to Canaan through God's initiative as Genesis 15:7 seems to suggest?

I concur with the suggestion that Genesis 11:27-32 ought to be understood as a summary or an overview of Genesis 12:1-9 (Ross 1988:258-259). In this sense, Abram may have received God's call (Gn 12:1-3) and may have moved with his family and his father Terah to Haran. Afterwards, his father might have died in Haran (Gn 11:32), then Abram and his family including Lot might have moved from Haran to Canaan (Gn 12:4-5). God appeared to Abram in Genesis 15:1-21 in order to establish a covenant relationship with



him. This later explanation would fit with what Genesis 15:7 seems to suggest. This interpretation logically implies that God is reminding Abram in Genesis 15:7 of their past relationship. Abram had already been following God's initiative, so he would now consider establishing a covenantal relationship with God based upon their previous mutual relationship.

#### 3.3.2.2.3 Obligations for the vassal party (Gn 17:1b, 9-14)

A third characteristic in the Ancient Near East treaty form is the obligation of the vassal or mutual obligation. Such obligations are spelled out by the higher party to the vassal party (Ross 1988:327). In the case of the covenant between God and Abram, Abram is the vassal party. God is therefore responsible for spelling out the covenant obligations for Abram. To this effect, God spells out covenant obligations for Abram in Genesis 17:1b, 9-14. The first obligation (v.1b) is that Abram will have to walk<sup>27</sup> before God and must be blameless (~ymit' hyEh.w< yn:p'l. %Leh;t.hi). Abram is bound to obey God's covenant obligations. Similarly the use of the imperative hyEh.w< (to be) adds another impetus to the seriousness of the command. Abram must walk in the presence of God without any defect. He must be complete in his devotion.

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<sup>27</sup> The word %Leh;t.hi is *hitpael* imperative masculine singular meaning 'walk'. The use of *hitpael* imperative here denotes a strong command.

Another covenant obligation God spelled out for Abram also includes his descendants and possibly his infinite generations to come. Abraham's immediate descendants as well as all his coming generations must keep God's covenant just like Abraham is expected to keep it (17:9). Here, the covenant ties Abram to his descendants. The word  $\%Leh;t.hi$  is *hitpael* imperative masculine singular meaning 'walk'. The use of *hitpael* imperative here denotes a strong command, even to an infinite period of time. This covenant keeping obligation also is applied to the obligation of circumcision (17:10-13). Abram is commanded to circumcise himself and all the males in his household as a permanent (memorable) sign of the covenant. Every male must be circumcised. Whoever lives in Abraham's household must be circumcised. The covenant obligation of circumcision also extends beyond the blood related descendants of Abram. The covenant obligation of circumcision covers the aliens, those that have been bought from foreigners, temporary residents and virtually everyone who lives under the auspices of Abram and his descendants. Any person who is brought (or who comes by himself) to the house of Abraham must be made to obey this covenant law of circumcision.

In other words, the covenant sign of circumcision also ties Abram to his descendants as well as to his infinite generations to come. In the covenant sign of circumcision, Abram is also linked with foreigners, aliens, slaves or virtually every other person who comes to live under the auspices of Abram or

his descendants. The covenant sign of circumcision therefore includes virtually everyone. This sign does not discriminate nor does it exclude others on the basis of race, language, tribe, social status etcetera provided a person is willing to live in obedience to the covenant laws. Once a person is willing to obey the covenant laws, including the law of circumcision, that person is permitted to living under the care and protection of Abrahamic covenant. The person becomes a covenant member.

Since covenant involves blood letting, circumcision practically binds a person by blood to Abraham and God's covenant. The sign of circumcision would always remind Abram and his descendants, including foreigners, of God's covenant with them. Circumcision would also remind Abraham and his descendants as well as foreigners about the consequences of failing to obey the covenant laws or obligations.

#### 3.3.2.2.4 Necessity of keeping the covenant (Gn 17:7, 13-14).

Since a covenantal relationship was viewed as a serious relationship among the Ancient Near Eastern people, the higher party would normally include a statement showing the necessity of keeping the agreement. With respect to the Abrahamic covenant, this characteristic is found in the previous element (Gn 17:7, 13) concerning the obligations of Abraham and his descendants. Abraham and his descendants are previously commanded to walk before God

and be blameless. They are also commanded to circumcise every male living among them.

Genesis 17:7, 13 indicates that the covenant obligations are permanent. The obligations must be obeyed from one generation to the other. The necessity of keeping the covenant obligation is also strengthened by the threat to cut away anyone who fails to circumcise, from the house of Abraham (Gn 17:14). Though the public reading of the covenant document is not mentioned in this text, the covenant sign of circumcision however, is an indelible mark that reminds Abraham and his descendants about their covenant obligation before God. Abraham, his descendants and foreigners living among them must all keep the covenant.

#### 3.3.2.2.5 Witnesses to the treaty (Gn 15:17-18)

In normal Ancient Near Eastern treaty the higher party invokes witnesses to the covenant event. However, in terms of the covenant between God and Abraham, God did not invoke the name of any other god. According to Ross (1988:312), God Himself is a witness, symbolized in the passing of the fire pot between the severed animals because there is none greater than God to whom He would swear upon (Gn 15:17-18).

### 3.3.2.2.6 Pronouncement of blessing<sup>28</sup> and curses<sup>29</sup>

Another feature in the Ancient Near Eastern treaty form is the pronouncement of curse and blessing. This pronouncement is done in two ways. Firstly, the parties would pass between severed animals set aside for the purpose (Adar 1990:63; Walton & Matthews 1997:41-42; Jr 34:8-9, 18-19) as a witness to what would happen to both parties if they violate the terms of the covenant. Secondly, the higher party would normally make verbal pronouncement of the curses resulting from any violation of the covenant in addition to the passing between the divided animals. He/She would also pronounce the blessing for the vassal party if the vassal party keeps the covenant.

Regarding the covenant between God and Abraham, God pronounces the covenant blessings and curses in both the first and second covenant texts (Gn 15:1-21; 17:1-27). God made several promises of blessing to Abram and his descendants. First, He made a promise to provide Abram with a son who would come from Abram's own body (15:4-5) and He would also provide him with long peaceful years (15:15). Meanwhile, Sarah also would be blessed by God. She will give birth to the son whom God had promised Abram (17:16, 19). God would eventually continue (establish) His covenant relationship with Isaac whom Sarah would deliver (17:21). In addition, Abram will become fruitful (17:6).

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<sup>28</sup> See Gn 15:4-5, 15; 17:6-8, 16, 19, 21.

<sup>29</sup> See Gn 15:9-10, 17; 17:14.

Second, God would give to Abram and his descendants the land from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: this land would cover the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Rephaim, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Girgashite and the Jebusite tribes(15:7, 18-21; 17:8).

Third, Abraham would be the father of many nations (17:4). Surprisingly, God had already made him the father of many nations before He even related it to Abram (17:5). God also made a promise to Abram that kings would emerge from him (17:6). This role of kingship may be understood as the vicegerent role assigned to Adam and Eve from the beginning of creation (Gn 1:28) and also to Noah and his family from the beginning of recreation (Gn 9:1-3).

Fourth, God would become the God of Abram and his descendants (17:8). God's promise that He would be Abraham's God indicates that Abram and his descendants would live under the protection, blessing and favour of God. God would protect and sustain Abram and his descendants in the land of promise. Abram should not look forward to other gods in times of trouble. God is able to care for Abram and is basically able to provide for all the needs of Abraham and his descendants.

Fifth, God will also bless Ishmael (17:20). He will be fruitful and would become the father of many tribes. Despite the fact that Ishmael would receive God's blessing, God would not make a covenant with Ishmael (17:21); rather God will continue the line of covenant with Isaac etcetera. In regard to this specific direction of Abrahamic covenant, it is possible to argue that Ishmael may receive God's covenant blessings through Abraham and his descendants just like other nations, aliens, foreigners and tribes would receive similar covenant blessings through Abraham and his seed (Gn. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26: 4; 28:14).

Meanwhile, the curses God pronounced over Abram/Abraham in the course of disobedience are not immediately in view in Genesis 15. Rather what is striking here is that God has committed himself to keeping his promises. If he does not keep to his covenant promises, his fate is here symbolized, in the event of the severing of the animals (Gn 15:9-10, 17, cf. Keil & Delitzsch 1975a:214; Ross 1988:312; Fretheim 1994:449). As the animals are slaughtered and God's representation passes between the slaughtered animals, the same would apply to God if he breaks the covenant obligations/promises.

Meanwhile Abram obliged to keep the covenant by circumcising all the males in his household. Failure to circumcise will result to being severed from the

covenant relationship or being cut off (  $ht'r>k.nIw>$ <sup>30</sup>) from Abraham's household (Gn 17:14; cf. Fretheim 1994:459). This would also mean that the person will be excluded from all the covenant blessings. It is the same word which is used for cutting a covenant (Gn 15:18). Since the process of covenant making involves blood letting, cutting and eliminating, the consequences of disobeying the covenant obligations also may be considered as blood letting<sup>31</sup>.

### 3.4 IMPLICATIONS OF ABRAHAMIC COVENANT.

#### 3.4.1 Exclusive and Inclusive.

There are a number of implications that could be noted from the Abrahamic *berit* (covenant). Firstly, the Abrahamic *berit* is both exclusive and inclusive.

On the one hand, the covenant is between God and Abraham. On the other hand the covenant is also between God (the higher party Gn 15:1, 18) and Abraham (the vassal party Gn 15:1, 18) including his descendants (Gn 15:18-19; 17:6-8) as well as foreigners (Gn 17:4-5, 12-14, 16, 24-27). A practical example of this exclusive and inclusive scenario is in the conversation between God and Abraham concerning Ishmael (Gn 17:18-19). This

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<sup>30</sup> The word  $ht'r>k.nIw>$  used in Genesis 17:14 is a *niphal waw* consecutive perfect third person singular which is derived from the verb  $trk$  meaning to 'cut off', 'kill' or 'eliminate' (Kelly 1992:384).

<sup>31</sup> This is my personal view concerning the implication of circumcision.



conversation if viewed on the surface may appear that Ishmael is excluded from the covenant between God and Abraham.

Surprisingly, it turned out that Ishmael is also included in the covenant because he will also enjoy Abrahamic covenant blessing. In addition to that blessing, Ishmael is also made to bear the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, that is, circumcision (Gn 17:26). The Abrahamic covenant therefore may be understood as both exclusive and inclusive in its nature and application (cf. Adar 1990:66).

#### 3.4.2 God unilaterally administered the covenant.

In normal ancient covenant treaty, both parties agree to the terms involved in the relationship symbolized by both parties passing between the severed animals before the contract becomes binding (Adar1990:63). In this regard, if one party rejects the terms and conditions set up for the relationship, the relationship will no longer be possible. On the contrary, the covenant between God and Abraham is unilaterally administered by God. It is God who initiates the covenant (Gn 15:9-10; 17:2). He alone pronounces the purposes of the covenant (Gn12:2-3; 17:7; 18:19). He alone spells out the terms of the covenant (Gn 17:1, 9-14). Abraham is simply brought in to receive the blessings of the covenant and to keep the terms of it together with his descendants. .

### 3.4.3 Goal of Abrahamic covenant.

Among the Ancient Near Eastern people, a covenantal relationship always has specific goal(s) or value(s). The importance or value of such an agreement is highlighted in the process of making the covenant. If the covenant relationship has no relevance, it is almost meaningless. In addition, both parties ought to know the relevance of establishing such a relationship.

Similarly, the Abrahamic covenant had specific relevant goals (cf. Gn 12:2-3; 15:1, 4, 7; 17:4—8; 18:19). One of the main purposes of Abrahamic covenant was relationship (Gn 17:7). Before God would intervene in human history in a special way to execute long term plans for His creation after the event of Babel (Gn 11:1-9), He begins by having a covenant<sup>32</sup> relationship with Abraham and his descendants (12:1-17:27). Through God's covenant<sup>33</sup> relationship with Abraham, God will accomplish all other things he had promised to Abraham (Gn 18:19).

Another significance of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants seen from Genesis 18:19, is that Abraham will direct his children and his

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<sup>32</sup> The fall of Adam and Eve (Gn 3:1-22) and the event of Babel (Gn 11:1-7) resulted in the severing of the loving relationship between God and mankind (Gn 3:23-24; 11:8-9). These events of human disobedience and separation from God became fundamental precursors to the re-establishment of a covenantal relationship between God and mankind through Abraham.

<sup>33</sup> One may ask 'would God not able to reveal himself to mankind through other means apart from the covenant?' The answer is that God can use any means that accords to His will to accomplish His purposes. So, God may have chosen another means to reveal Himself to mankind without using the mechanism of a covenant. However, God used the means of a covenant because that was the means He wanted to use.

household to keep the way of the Lord and to do what is right and just. In other words, leadership, obedience, righteousness and justice are also at the heart of God's covenant with Abraham. More than that God plans to bless Abraham and his descendants with land, children, wealth, nations and make him and his seed a channel of blessing to other nations (Gn 12:2-3; 15:4,7; 17:4-8; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14).

Walton (2001:382, 401) also argues that God chose Abraham and his descendants for several meaningful objectives. The main purpose for electing Abraham and his descendants was to serve as instruments through which God will reveal Himself to His creation (Ross 1988:260; Walton & Matthews 1997:36-37). Abraham and his descendants could benefit from the covenant (e.g. by having land, prosperity, national identity etc) if they remained faithful to the covenant obligations. So, God brought this self-revelatory purpose to fruition through the mechanism of a covenant. God's self-revelation was always at the centre of His covenant with the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. Moreover, all the nations were also included in this self-revelation of God (Walton 2001:401-404). God did not want to limit His self-revelation to Abraham or his descendants; He did not want His self-revelation to be obscured before other nations. He always had all the nations in His mind as the target of His revelation. He intended that His entire creation should know Him and reverence Him as their creator, sustainer and redeemer through Abraham and his descendants.

Another relevance of the covenant between God and Abraham was salvation<sup>34</sup>. Salvation was embedded in this covenant on multiple levels. Firstly, Abraham's descendants would live as slaves in a foreign nation but God would deliver them and bring them to the land he promises to Abraham (Gn 15:13-16). Secondly, Abraham and his descendants (seed) would serve as a channel through which God would bless other nations (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14). In other words, the seed of Abraham by implication becomes the means of blessing as well as the hinge-pin between Abraham and other nations. In these covenant promises, there is an inseparable link between God and Abraham as well as God and other nations (see also Dt 10:12-22). The covenant obviously imposes itself upon Abraham to relate with other nations in order that God's self-revelation and blessing would be known and reverend among other nations.

#### 3.4.4 Significance of name change.

According to Walton & Matthews (1997:44), there was a great significance attached to names of persons in the ancient world. It was also believed that giving a name to someone shows that the person has control or power over the one that is named. Similarly, God's changing of Abram and Sarai's names (Gn17:5, 15) denote a reiteration of the covenant promises and his

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<sup>34</sup> Gn 15:13-14; 48:21; 50:24-25.

control and authority over their course of life and destiny. In the same way, Freedman (1992:39) argued that “Genesis introduces the longer name as part of the covenant God made with Abram, so the new name confirmed God’s control and marked a stage in the patriarch’s career” (cf. Fretheim 1994:459; Wenham 1994:21).

### **3. 5 ABRAHAMIC COVENANT PROMISES CONCERNING FOREIGNERS**

#### **3. 5. 1. Introduction**

In this section, the study will examine Genesis 12:3b and some related texts<sup>35</sup> that deal with God’s promises to Abraham, particularly the promise that concern the blessing of other nations through Abraham and his descendants. The study will examine the Hebrew grammar and syntax of the passages. There are several passages from the book of Genesis that expresses God’s promise to Abraham concerning the blessing of all nations through him or his seed. These passages include Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18. Hereby, the

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<sup>35</sup> Gn 17:4-5, 12-16; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14.

Abrahamic covenant promise with Isaac (Gn. 26:4,) and Jacob (Gn. 28:14)<sup>36</sup> are reaffirmed. The five different texts are translated in the footnote<sup>37</sup>.

### 3.5.2 Perspectives on Abrahamic covenant promise(s)

There are two basic concerns in this section. Firstly, Scholars<sup>38</sup> have contended about the correct translation and interpretation of the word

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<sup>36</sup>These passages are quoted below from the Hebrew-BHS (4<sup>th</sup> edition) and English-NAS (New American Standard Bible) versions of the Bible respectively, for a better understanding of the issue at stake here.

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 12: 3b `hm'd'a]h' txoP.v.mi lKo ^b.

Wkr>b.nIw>

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Genesis 18: 18 `#r,a'h' yyEAG lKo Ab

Wkr>b.nIw

and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?

Genesis 22: 18 #r,a'h' yyEAG lKo ^[]r>z:b.

Wkr]B't.hi.

`yliqoB T[.m;v' rv,a] bq,[e

And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.

Genesis 26:4b `#r,a'h' yyEAG lKo ^[]r>z:b.

Wkr]B't.hiw>

and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed;

Genesis 28:14 `^[,r>z:b.W hm'd'a]h' txoP.v.mi-lK' ^b.

Wkr]b.nIw>

and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

<sup>38</sup> See Hamilton (1990:373-376) for a list of some of the scholars.

Wkr>b.nIw used for “blessing”.<sup>39</sup> The concern among scholars (e.g. Hamilton 1990:374; Wenham 1987:277) here is whether the *niphal* be translated as a passive<sup>40</sup> (shall be blessed), middle (shall find blessing) or reflexive (shall bless themselves) voice. Secondly, there is debate about the nature of the Abrahamic promises. The question is what kind of blessing God promised other nations via Abraham and his seed? Is this blessing material, political, social, agricultural, messianic or both etcetera? In what follows, this study will examine the views of certain scholars on the two matters mentioned above.

### 3.5.2.1 Passive interpretation of *barak*

Wenham (1987:278), Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) and other scholars<sup>41</sup> argue that even though the verb forms Wkr>b.nI in Genesis 12:3b may be translated as a reflexive or a passive voice, it is most appropriate to translate the word as a passive voice. Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) argues further that on the one hand, the reflexive meaning suggests that other nations were to use Abraham’s name in invoking blessing upon themselves. On the other hand,

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<sup>39</sup> Hamilton (1990:374), Wenham (1987:277), Waltke (2001:206) and Leupold (1942:414).

<sup>40</sup> Hamilton (1990:374) argues that “if the verb in question has passive force, then [Genesis] 12:3 clearly articulates the final goal in a divine plan for universal salvation, and Abram is the divinely chosen instrument in the implementation of that plan.”

<sup>41</sup> Walton (2001:402-403) and Hamilton (1990:375).

the passive interpretation points toward other nations being blessed by Abraham and his descendants.

Hamilton (1990:375) also argues that Psalm 72:17b may be support for a passive interpretation of *barak* in Genesis 12:3. According to him, both LXX and Vulgate translate the *barak* in Psalm 72:17b as a passive verb form. He also disputed the truism that the *hitpael* form is never translated passively. He cited the works of Kaiser (1978:13) and Allis (1927), to support his own premise. He argued further that the result of Allis' study showed that there are 18 Old Testament references where the *hitpael* form may have a passive meaning. Therefore, Hamilton (1990:375) added Proverb 31:30; Ecclesiastes 8:10; and Psalm 72:17 to Allis's list. In doing so, he reiterated that "it is best to retain the passive force of 12:3, and to see in this last of seven phrases [Gn 12:1-3], with its emphatic perfect, the culmination of this initial promise of God in the patriarch" (cf. Ellington 1994:203-207 for similar viewpoint).

### 3.5.2.2 Reflexive interpretation of *barak*

Scholars<sup>42</sup> who support reflexive interpretation claim that the inherent idea of the *niphal* is reflexive; as a result, this *niphal* should be interpreted as a reflexive, similar to the *hitpael* form of Genesis 22:18 and 26: 4 and Psalm 72:17b. Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) argues that whether one translate it as

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<sup>42</sup> Such as Leupold (1942:414), Albrektson (1967:79), Weinfeld (1980:426) and Waltke (2001:206)



passive or reflexive, it still carries the same implication (that is, if those who bless Abram are blessed, and all families of the earth bless Abram, then it follows that all families would be blessed/find blessing in him), given the context of the word.

### 3.5.2.3 Perspective of Walton on the verb forms.

This study agrees with Walton and other Bible interpreters<sup>43</sup> who suggest that the verb forms for the word *barak* be translated passively. Walton (2001:392-394) has offered a cogent and preferable explanation to the above contentious verb forms of *barak*. He disagrees with those who translate the verbs forms as reflexives<sup>44</sup> by arguing that all the five passages are covenant formulations. However, this does not necessarily mean that all the forms should be interpreted in the same way. Walton argues that the *Niphal* and the *Hithpael* were used by the author to convey his specific perspective on the blessings other nations may have through Abraham.

Walton (2001:393) argues that within the context of the two passages that have the *hithpael* forms (i.e. Gn 22:18 and 26:4), “the blessing declaration is immediately preceded by clauses of domination over land/cities of their enemies (22:17; 26:4), and immediately followed by

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<sup>43</sup> Leupold (1942:413, 414), Luther (1960:260), Church (1973:26), Leale (1974:232), Keil & Delitzsch (1975a:193,194) and Walton (2001:402-403).

<sup>44</sup> E.g. Leupold (1942:414) and Waltke (2001:206).

an acknowledgment that this condition will come about because of an act of obedience (22:18; 26:5).” These two passages have been distinguished from the other three texts (i.e. Gn 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) because of certain features like domination, acknowledgement and obedience. The *hithpael* voice serves these features better.

Walton (2001:393-394) reiterated that the use of the preposition **ב**, following the verb ‘bless’, describes the one whose care, protection and favor are desired and relied upon. In Genesis 22:18 and 26:4, the *hithpael* form is used and the preposition **ב** is added to “your seed,” to suggest that other nations will get the protection and favor through Abraham’s seed. In other words, the *hithpael* form is used here to express people’s efforts or interests to grovel to God/king/Abram’s seed.

By contrasting the two passages (i.e. Gn 22:18; 26:4) with the remaining three texts (Gn 12:3; 18:18; 28:14), Walton (2001:394) explained that these passages have the *niphal* voice, suggesting that this blessing will come to other people or nations through Abraham, his family or his seed without people’s attempt to ingratiate themselves with Abraham, his family or his seed. This blessing is not conditioned on obedience and does not come as a result of domination. In this

sense, Walton argues that the passive translation of the above three passages be preferred<sup>45</sup>.

#### 5.3.2.4 Nature of the blessing

Concerning the nature of the blessing promised to other nations via Abraham and his descendants, Sarna (1989:89, 90, 183) argues that it is material prosperity. However, he did not elaborate on that assertion.

On the contrary, certain Jewish rabbis (such as Freedman and Simon 1939a:323) argue that this promise was not intended to be a material blessing. They contended that if the blessing was meant to be wealth, other nations were wealthier than the Jews. In this sense, they suggested that the blessing was meant to be a counsel as well as messianic activities. In regard to the counsel, whenever other nations are in trouble they may seek counsel from Abraham and his descendants. In reference to the messianic activities Freedman and Simon (1939b:575) argued that the promise God made with Abraham and his descendants included the work of the Messiah. During the messianic period, all other nations would be blessed. Unfortunately, Freedman and Simon did not elaborate on their viewpoint as regards to the person, work and time frame of the Messiah.

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<sup>45</sup> The passive translation of the passages include: "And in you all the families of the earth **shall be blessed**" (Gn 12:3b); "since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth **will be blessed?**" (Gn 18:18); "and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth **be blessed**" (Gn 28:14).

Walton (2001:401-403) also clarified the meaning of this blessing by saying that God chose Abraham and his descendants-Israel to be a channel of God's revelation<sup>46</sup> to other nations.<sup>47</sup> Through Abraham's family, the Mosaic Law was given; the prophets came from them; the scriptures were written by them; their history became a public document of God's revelation. Then the highest epochal blessing was the coming of the Messiah—the seed of Abraham. Through Him, all nations have received their redemption and the forgiveness of sins and are reconciled with God and fellow human beings.

### **3. 6. RELATING EZRA-NEHEMIAH TO ABRAHAMIC COVENANT**

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<sup>46</sup> “For I have chosen him [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gn 18:19). In other words, God will let Abraham know his will (way). As a consequence, Abraham will lead (direct) his children to do according the revealed will of God. The implication of this text is that Abraham is chosen to lead his children in God's righteousness and justice so that other nations may see the will of God in Abraham and his descendants.

<sup>47</sup> The eschatological climax of God's revelatory program was not as obvious to the eyes of the Old Testament Israel as it is to the New Testament audience today. They did not fully comprehend the dimension that God's revelation would take. However, they were not completely obscured from comprehending God's eschatological intervention in the history of the world for soteriological purposes. Furthermore, a number of passages that points to all nations as the grand parameters of God's revelation include: Ex 10:2; Jos 4:21-24; Is 49:26; 60:1-3; Ezk 36:23; 37:28; 39:21-22; Jl 3:14-17; Rm 3:1-2.

### 3.6.1. Introduction

There are several features that tie Ezra-Nehemiah to the covenant promises that God made with Abraham and his descendants. These include the status of foreigners in both the context of Ezra-Nehemiah and in the Abrahamic covenant promises as well as the affinity between Ezra-Nehemiah and the covenant promises concerning land ownership et cetera. In the following discussion, the study will describe how there is an unrelenting relationship between Ezra-Nehemiah and the Abrahamic covenant promises concerning the relationship between Israel and other nations.

### 3.4.2. Affinity between Israel and foreigners in the Abrahamic covenant

There are several ways that the covenant promises between God and Abram/Abraham in Genesis 12:3 can be related to Ezra-Nehemiah. This study has already examined the nature of the covenant. It is obvious that God's purposes for establishing the covenant with humanity were manifold. One of the main goals was to establish a relationship between Himself and other nations through Abraham and his descendants. Through this covenantal relationship, God will also make known his will to humankind. The God-man relationship that was lost in the Garden of Eden and the event of Babel was to be restored through the institution of a covenantal relationship. God selected Abraham and his descendants as instruments through which this covenantal

relationship and His will/programme would be accomplished (Gn 17:7-9; 18:18-19; cf. Dt 4:9-10; 6:4-13).

According to the covenantal relationship with Abraham, God intended that all other nations should know Him and reverence Him as their creator, sustainer and redeemer. Abraham and his descendants were never intended to live an isolated life from the rest of other nations but should be the light of God shining in darkness in order to disperse that darkness (Gn 17:7-9; 18:18-19; Dt 4:9-10; 6:4-13). Keck (1994:424) argued that Abraham's election presupposed his missionary task to the nations. This was the inseparable link between Abraham and other nations.

The circumcision of Ishmael and other people of Abraham's household seem to strengthen this Abrahamic-foreign relationship (Gn 17:12-14, 25-27). Foreigners, aliens and all those living under the auspices of Abraham and his descendants were to be circumcised. Foreigners were not to be ignored, pushed aside or left uncircumcised because of their ethnic, racial or national background. They all participated in the covenant ceremony between God and Abraham through circumcision. Abraham adhered to this covenant charge by circumcising all males in his household, including aliens, foreigners and those who were bought from other nations (Gn 17:23-27).

The covenantal function of circumcision and other obligations were to be in effect at all times. There was no time in the history of the covenant people that foreigners were totally excluded from rallying around the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob if they accepted the God of Abraham and in return, abandoned the worship of other gods. The inclusion of Ruth (the Moabite), Rahab (the Canaanite), Beersheba (the Hittite) et cetera, sustained the argument that Israel was inseparably linked with other nations in order to extend God's will and blessings of the covenant relationship.

In view of this, events in Ezra and Nehemiah must be examined and understood in light of the obligations of the covenant relationship. The role of the post-exilic Jewish community in relation to other nations must therefore be examined in light of the grand-purpose of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and later with Moses and Israel. The manner Ezra-Nehemiah applied the Abrahamic covenant promises to their post-exilic situation is one of the reasons why I am relating the covenant promises in the book of Genesis to the events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

### 3. 6.3. Affinity in Ezra and Nehemiah to the Abrahamic covenant

What strengthens the relationship between Ezra-Nehemiah and the covenant promises is Ezra and Nehemiah's acknowledgement of God's promises to

Abraham.<sup>48</sup> This acknowledgement obviously suggests that an undiminished link exist between the events in Genesis<sup>49</sup> and the events in the period of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 is situated in the context of Israelites' confession concerning their disobedience and intermarriage with the people of the land. In the above passage, it is more compelling to suggest that the Israelites wanted to highlight their legitimacy to the land of Judah during the post-exilic period. The Israelites seem to assert that the election of Abram, his name change and the covenant/promises God made to him and his descendants defined the status of the returning exiles with respect to the land. In view of this, the returning Jewish community were inseparably tied with the previous Israelite community and their land through the covenant promises God made with Abraham (Williamson 1985:318-319; Blenkinsopp 1989:303-304; Breneman 1993:236-237; Klein 1999:810-811). They understood themselves as the descendants of Abraham.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 is also closely related to Ezra 9:10-15. The text concerns Ezra's prayers about Israel's disobedience on intermarriage. Though the two

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<sup>48</sup> Neh 9: 7-8. 7 "Thou art the LORD God, Who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, And gave him the name Abraham. 8 "And Thou didst find his heart faithful before Thee, And didst make a covenant with him To give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite-To give it to his descendants. And Thou hast fulfilled Thy promise, For Thou art righteous (The quotation is from New American Standard Bible 1977).

<sup>49</sup> Gn12:1-3; 15; 17; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14



passages (Neh 9:7-8; Ezr 9:10-15) does not mention the rest of the other covenant promises, the texts inescapably forces its readers to see the inseparable link that exist between the covenant promises that God made with Abraham and Israel and the events that have occurred during their time. If the covenant promises between God, Abraham and his descendants were so central in deciding the status of the early post-exilic Jewish community concerning the ownership of the promised land and marital relationship, the same principle might be seen in operation through the covenantal role of this post-exilic Jewish community toward other nations, that is, the extension of God's covenantal blessings and will (Gn 12:1-3; 17:7; 18:18-19; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14) to other nations. In effect, this is to assert that as the covenant promises determine who should own the land of Israel and whom they should marry, so, the same covenant promises determine how Israel should relate with other nations or foreigners.

Closely related to the above thought, Fretheim (1994:426) argued that the entire history of Israel and its role to the nations was constituted and shaped by God's covenant promises. The covenant determines the relationship between Abraham and his descendants with other nations. Israel cannot shy away from this covenant role of being a channel of God's blessing to other nations. Israel must function as an instrument through which God's knowledge and blessings may reach other nations.

It should also be borne in mind that intermarriage was not essentially prohibited for its own sake as the events in Ezra and Nehemiah seem to imply. The context of Deuteronomy 7:1-26, where intermarriage was prohibited, clearly reveals that God's concern was to safe-guard Israel against the worship of other gods. God did not want Israel to worship other gods besides Him. So, intermarriage prohibition was done to address the issue of idolatry or religious syncretism. It had no ethnic, racial or national separation as its intention. In view of this, the early post-exilic Jewish community is unavoidably tied to other races, tribes and nations through the Abrahamic covenant promises and obligations.

## CHAPTER 4

### PERSPECTIVES ON FOREIGNERS IN THE PENTATEUCH, DEUTERONOMIC- DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY AND EZRA-NEHEMIAH

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of two sections. The first section is a brief overview of Pentateuch and Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic<sup>1</sup> perspectives on foreigners. It serves as an introduction to the second section which explores the perspectives on foreigners in Ezra and Nehemiah. The investigation reveals two perspectives<sup>2</sup> in Ezra and Nehemiah concerning foreigners. These perspectives are evaluated in light of the covenant stipulations between God and Israel concerning foreigners and also at the back drop of other events<sup>3</sup> that have occurred in the history of Israel.

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

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<sup>1</sup> "Scholars identify the books from Joshua through Kings as the 'Deuteronomic History' or 'Deuteronomistic History' (DH)" (Dillard & Longman III 1994:153-154).

<sup>2</sup> The two perspectives include those who are sympathetic toward foreigners/non-exiles and those who are unsympathetic toward them.

<sup>3</sup> Such as intermarriage between Israelites and non-Israelites (e.g. Tamar - Gn 38:1-30, Ruth - Rt 4:9-22, Rahab - Rt 4:20-21; Jos 6:17, 23, 25; cf. Mt 1:4-5, Esther - Es 1:17-18 and Bathsheba - 2 Sm 11:26-27; 12:24-25 etc).

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.

In contrast to the first perspective that excludes foreigners on the basis of the covenant, I will argue that foreigners were not totally excluded from having any relationship with the Jews based on the covenant between God and Israel (Lev 18:26, cf. Hartley 1992:298). Foreigners were in some sense incorporated in the covenant between God and Israel. One of the basic conditions was that they were to denounce their foreign gods and embrace Yahweh, the God of Israel. If that condition was met, they were welcomed in the religious and social life of Israel. This principle can be seen in the cases of Tamar (Gn 38:6-30, cf. Mt 1:3), Ruth (Ruth 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) et cetera. Nowhere in Scripture can we find total or absolute exclusion of all foreigners from the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel on the basis of the covenant as the text of Ezra and Nehemiah seems to presuppose (e.g. Ezr 4:3; Neh 2:20; 13:3).

## **4.2 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PENTATEUCHAL AND DEUTERONOMIC-DEUTERONOMISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON FOREIGNERS**

### 4.2.1 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 foreigners<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, there are certain texts that reveal Israel as an exclusive, non-conforming society regarding foreigners<sup>5</sup>. 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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Ex 23:31-33; Nm 31:1-12; Dt 7:1-6; Jos 21:44.

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. What I mean is that there appear to be certain provisions in the various covenants for foreigners to rally around Yahweh, the God of Israel.

#### 4.2.2 Foreigners in the Abrahamic covenant

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/seed<sup>6</sup>. 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 descendants<sup>7</sup>.

Immediately following the covenant event in Genesis 17, Abraham and Lot welcomes strangers in their homes (Gn 18:1-8; 19:1-3) respectively,

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<sup>6</sup> Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

<sup>7</sup> 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."

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 other<sup>8</sup>.

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).*

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

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

as one of the means by which foreigners may be incorporated in the religious and social life of Israel<sup>9</sup>.

#### 4.2.3 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 aliens<sup>10</sup>. 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

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<sup>9</sup> 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).

<sup>10</sup> 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.



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 22:21-24<sup>11</sup>; 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

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<sup>11</sup> 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."

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.

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.

#### 4.2.4 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 found in 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.

### **4.3 PERSPECTIVES ON FOREIGNERS IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH**

#### **4.3.1 Introduction**

There appear to be two opposing perspectives concerning the place of foreigners in Ezra and Nehemiah<sup>12</sup>. On the one hand, there is a dominant perspective in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that looks at foreigners with suspicion. This perspective considers foreigners as a threat to the religious,

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<sup>12</sup> Farisani (2003:35) personalized these opposing ideas when he argues that “When one reads Ezra-Nehemiah, one immediately detects a contestation between the returned exiles and the *am haaretz*. By the returned exiles here we are referring to all the Jews who were taken into exile by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., and returned back home with the assistance of the Persian King Cyrus in 539 B.C. The *am haaretz* are those Jews who did not go into Babylonian exile but stayed in Palestine.”

political and economic life and progress of the early post-exilic Jewish community.

On the other hand, there is a second perspective that looks at foreigners with appreciation. This latter perspective considers foreigners as partners, friends and human beings whom God can use to achieve His holy purposes. This view appears to be more open to foreigners in a certain sense than the former. This perspective does not necessary see every foreigner as a threat to Israel's identity and relationship with Yahweh but views them as human beings who can partner with Israel in religious, social and communal life.

In what follows, I will trace the two perspectives from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. I will identify the two perspectives as exclusive and inclusive perspectives. Then we will explore how these exclusive and inclusive perspectives play out in Ezra and Nehemiah narratives.

#### **4.3.2 Ezra narrative<sup>13</sup>**

##### **4.3.2.1 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

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<sup>13</sup> 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.

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 heart<sup>14</sup>. The King appears to be doing 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).<sup>15</sup> 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)<sup>16</sup>. 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 temple<sup>17</sup> 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

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<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Does the order imply that only the returning Jews should rebuild the Temple?

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).

#### 4.3.2.2 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 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

unanswered<sup>18</sup>. 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.

#### 4.3.2.3 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 commence 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).

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<sup>18</sup> 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.



For instance, the people of Sidon and Tyre<sup>19</sup> contribute immensely to the rebuilding work by 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 turn 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 seriously<sup>20</sup>. Yet their claim was not recognized by the returning exiles.

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<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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

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 request<sup>21</sup> of the foreigners in categorical terms.

*“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<sup>22</sup> 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<sup>23</sup> 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 people<sup>24</sup> around

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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).

<sup>21</sup> 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.”

<sup>22</sup> 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?

<sup>23</sup> The decree of Cyrus is reinterpreted as if it gave the *Golah* community an exclusive right to rebuild the temple (Keil 1999:695).

<sup>24</sup> “The people around them” This is one way of characterizing those who were excluded from the *Golah* community. Some of these people were identified by names such as Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, Shimshai (Ezr 4:7-9, 17, 23), Tattenai-governor of Trans-Euphrates and Shethar-Bozenai (Ezr 5:3, 6; 6:6, 13). Keil (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

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 the decrees of foreign kings<sup>25</sup>. 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

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gone to exile, those who were not considered to be Jews, and those who were not full members of the golah (exile) community.

<sup>25</sup> Kings Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes Ezr 6:14-15. The kings are said to have been influenced by Yahweh's command.

programme. Therefore, it is unreasonable to think that foreigners can participate in the work of rebuilding the holy Temple.

#### 4.3.2.4 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 6:21<sup>26</sup>, cf. Williamson 1985:85; Klein 1999:713)<sup>27</sup>.

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

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<sup>26</sup> Ezr 6:21 "And the sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to *join* them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate *the Passover*."

<sup>27</sup> 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.

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

#### 4.3.2.5 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)<sup>28</sup>. 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?

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

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<sup>28</sup> 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.

exclusion by these returning exiles?<sup>29</sup> 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 likened 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

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<sup>29</sup> 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?

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)<sup>30</sup>. Those who reject the plan are likely to be from an inclusive standpoint. 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 law<sup>31</sup> Ezra uses as his reference point for his painful divorce approach? Could his law on intermarriage be derived from Deuteronomy 7:3<sup>32</sup>? 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

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<sup>30</sup> 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 suggests that they actually opposed the decision 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.

<sup>31</sup> 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 necessary 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.

<sup>32</sup>Dt 7:3 "Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons."



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 passages<sup>33</sup> 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' marriage<sup>34</sup> (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 unacceptable to some other people (Ezr 10:15<sup>35</sup>). 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

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<sup>33</sup> See e.g. the cases of Tamar in Gn 38:6-30, cf. Mt 1:3; Ruth in Rt 1:16-17; 4:13-22, cf. Mt 1:5b; Rahab in Jos 6:22-23, cf. Mt 1:5a and Bathsheba in 2 Sm 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25, cf. Mt 1:6b et cetera.

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> Ezr 10:15 "Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them."

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 9:2<sup>36</sup> with Deuteronomy 9:4-6<sup>37</sup>? 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?

### 4.3.3 Nehemiah narrative

#### 4.3.3.1 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

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<sup>36</sup> Ezr 10:2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as *wives* for themselves and for their sons, so that **the holy race has intermingled** with the peoples of the lands."

<sup>37</sup> 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".

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 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)<sup>38</sup>.

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?

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<sup>38</sup> 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.

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.

#### 4.3.3.2 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 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?<sup>39</sup> 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).

#### 4.3.3.3 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

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<sup>39</sup> 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.

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?<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the allusion illustrates that from an exclusivist perspective, foreigners are not allowed to participate in such a religious assembly.

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.

#### 4.3.3.4 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

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<sup>40</sup> 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.

of the Law (Neh 10:28-30<sup>41</sup>). 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?

#### 4.3.3.5 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.

My first concern here is the attitudes 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

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<sup>41</sup> 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.

grand son of 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.

My second concern is about 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?

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

It appears from the texts of Ezra and Nehemiah that there are two perspectives which are in conflict with each other on several matters such as on the rebuilding of the altar, Temple and wall as well as on religious and marital relationships. The hinge pin here appears to be how foreigners may relate with the returning exiles on the above matters.

On the one hand, the perspective of Ezra and Nehemiah together with other returning exiles regarding foreigners seem to be very exclusive. In the exclusivist point of view, total separation from foreigners is one of the decisive land marks for the holiness of the early post-exilic Jewish community. This

exclusive viewpoint appears to be the dominant perspective in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

On the other hand, there is an inclusive perspective which is more sympathetic toward foreigners. This perspective appears to have come from few other returning exiles, certain Jews who had remained in the land during the exile and some other neighbouring peoples. This group resisted the abhorrent reforms of Ezra-Nehemiah and other returning exiles. They were more open to foreigners. Foreigners may be allowed to partner with the Jews in their religious life and communal living. Since it is an inclusive perspective, it appears to be suppressed in the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, a careful reading of the texts enables the reader to identify traces of this later perspective and bring it to the fore.

It is understandable why some scholars have argued that the books of Ruth and Jonah were written as a protest strategy against the exclusive perspective in Ezra-Nehemiah concerning foreigners (Cohn-Sherbok 2003:81). Consequently, the answer to the question “What is the nature of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in the early post-exilic period?” is that the relationship is both exclusive and inclusive. The first perspective comes from the returning exiles. It is in total opposition to foreigners relating with the returning exiles both in religious and social matters. The basis for this

exclusivist perspective appears to be the book of Moses. Unfortunately, I find it hard to substantiate exclusion on the basis of the book of Moses or certain texts from the Pentateuch and from the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic history. The basis for this exclusion must therefore be sought from somewhere else.

The second perspective appears to be inclusive in its relation with foreigners. This perspective which supports foreigners seems to come from various groups, namely, from the returning exiles, from some of the remnants who stayed in the land during the exile; from some other nations who occupied the northern part of Israel and from some of the neighbouring tribes.

Finally, I would like to admit that this study does not provide exhaustive solutions to the various questions or concerns that have been raised in this chapter. However, the problems have been raised because they are important and should not be obscured when examining the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. I also plan to explore some of these questions in my next study. Further research is also encouraged where current effort is limited.

## 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 foreigners<sup>1</sup> should be excluded from the religious life and communal living of the new Israelite community (the *Golah* community)<sup>2</sup>.

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 exiles<sup>3</sup>. 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 living<sup>4</sup>.

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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 people<sup>5</sup>. 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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)<sup>6</sup>. 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 nations<sup>7</sup>. 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)<sup>8</sup>. Obviously, other nations may not receive

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<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> 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 covenant<sup>9</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

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

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

### **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 covenant<sup>1</sup> 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.*

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<sup>1</sup> 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 passages<sup>2</sup> 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 Cyrus<sup>3</sup>, 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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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 Nineveh<sup>4</sup>) as He does about the Jews or Israelites?

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<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 promises<sup>6</sup> 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?

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

<sup>6</sup> 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 foreigners<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, there are certain texts that reveal Israel as an exclusive, non-conforming society regarding foreigners<sup>8</sup>. 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**

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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/seed<sup>9</sup>. 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 descendants<sup>10</sup>.

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 other<sup>11</sup>.

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).

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<sup>9</sup> Gn 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

<sup>10</sup> 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."

<sup>11</sup> 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 Israel<sup>12</sup>.

### **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 aliens<sup>13</sup>. 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-

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<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> 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.

24<sup>14</sup>; 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.

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<sup>14</sup> 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 narrative<sup>15</sup>**

##### **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 heart<sup>16</sup>. The King appears to be doing

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<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup> 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)<sup>18</sup>. 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 temple<sup>19</sup> 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

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<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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 unanswered<sup>20</sup>. 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 Tyre<sup>21</sup> contribute immensely to the rebuilding work by

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<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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 seriously<sup>22</sup>. 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 request<sup>23</sup> of the foreigners in categorical terms.

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<sup>22</sup> 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).

<sup>23</sup> 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 us<sup>24</sup> 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<sup>25</sup> 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 people<sup>26</sup> 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

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<sup>24</sup> 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?

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

<sup>26</sup> "The people around them" This is one way of characterizing those who were excluded from the *Golah* community. Some of these people were identified by names such as Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, Shimshai (Ezr 4:7-9, 17, 23), Tattenai-governor of Trans-Euphrates and Shethar-Bozenai (Ezr 5:3, 6; 6:6, 13). Klein (1999:695) explains that during the post-exilic period particularly in 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 kings<sup>27</sup>. 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 6:21<sup>28</sup>, cf. Williamson 1985:85; Klein 1999:713)<sup>29</sup>.

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

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

<sup>28</sup> Ezr 6:21 "And the sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to *join* them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate *the Passover*."

<sup>29</sup> 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)<sup>30</sup>. 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?

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<sup>30</sup> 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?<sup>31</sup> 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)<sup>32</sup>. Those who reject the plan are likely to be from an inclusive standpoint.

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<sup>31</sup> 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?

<sup>32</sup> 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 suggests 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 law<sup>33</sup> Ezra uses as his reference point for his painful divorce approach? Could his law on intermarriage be derived from Deuteronomy 7:3<sup>34</sup>? 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 passages<sup>35</sup> 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' marriage<sup>36</sup> (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

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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.

<sup>33</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> Dt 7:3 "Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons."

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. the cases of Tamar in Gn 38:6-30, cf. Mt 1:3; Ruth in Rt 1:16-17; 4:13-22, cf. Mt 1:5b; Rahab in Jos 6:22-23, cf. Mt 1:5a and Bathsheba in 2 Sm 11:3, 26-27; 12:24-25, cf. Mt 1:6b et cetera.

<sup>36</sup> 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 10:15<sup>37</sup>). 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 9:2<sup>38</sup> with Deuteronomy 9:4-6<sup>39</sup>? 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

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<sup>37</sup> Ezr 10:15 "Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them."

<sup>38</sup> Ezr 10:2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that **the holy race has intermingled** with the peoples of the lands."

<sup>39</sup> 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)<sup>40</sup>.

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

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<sup>40</sup> 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?<sup>41</sup> 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?<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the allusion illustrates that from an exclusivist perspective, foreigners are not allowed to participate in such a religious assembly.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> 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 10:28-30<sup>43</sup>). 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

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<sup>43</sup> 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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