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**FORMATIONS OF GROUP IDENTITY IN THE
POST-EXILIC PERIOD: An Analysis of Group Identity
Considering Nehemiah 13**

Japhet Mphande

Supervisor

Professor Dr Kristin Joachimsen

Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies

MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society

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DECLARATION

I, Japhet Mphande, hereby declare that the work of this thesis: *Formations of Group Identity in the Post-exilic Period: An Analysis of Group Identity Considering Nehemiah 13*, has been composed by myself. All the sources used or quoted herein have been indicated and properly acknowledged. I further confirm that no part of this thesis has yet been published for the purposed of obtaining any qualifications.

Signature: [signed] **Date:** 15th Of November 2018.

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ABBREVIATIONS

EM – EZRA MEMOIR

EN – EZRA-NEHEMIAH

NM – NEHEMIAH MEMOIR

OT – OLD TESTAMENT

ABSTRACT

Reading Nehemiah 13 closes reveals intriguing aspects of social life in Judea, a province that had changed hands from Babylon to Persia at that time. It was time when Judah regained her freedom. Those who had been exiled are believed to have continued the worship of Yahweh in Babylon despite obvious opposition to that. As they returned exiles, they continued worshipping Yahweh. These returned Judeans took upon themselves the title as the legitimate Israel. To smoothly facilitate that, records of people belonging to this group were tabulated, that was a clear mark that this was another “Israel” besides the “Israel” that did not go into exile. This study explores the formation of group identity in the post-exilic era with regards to details of Nehemiah 13. In order to maintain the group, exclusivism was fundamental, the members appreciated ancestry lineage, marrying from the out-group was totally banned though not everyone kept the oath, and hence, mixed marriages crept in. Monotheism was heavily emphasised. During the time of Nehemiah the law was upheld and many members of the in-group got themselves entangled into the law from the Book of Moses. Despite external influence, the group successfully maintained its borders and its group identity was recognised.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction, Background and Research Progression

Introduction and Thesis Motivation

This thesis focusses on group identity formations which are underlying in Nehemiah Chapter 13. It focusses on how the Babylonia returnees formed their group identity in the land of Judah. Nehemiah 13 gives some of the aggressive changes that were adopted by a group of the returned Judeans. The changes are more pronounced during the reign of Ezra and Nehemiah. Therefore, central to this thesis are the changes introduced by Nehemiah in the community of the returned Israelites. It is not possible to talk of some of the changes the community of the returned Judeans underwent such as the mixed marriage issue without referring to Ezra as some of them are a continuation of what was started by Ezra, Nehemiah's predecessor. In identifying this in-group of the Israelites, their adopted identity markers shall be tersely discussed as this is paramount to the establishment of the group's identity.

Nehemiah 13 starts with a convocation of the faithful mixed community gathered for religious purposes in the temple in Jerusalem. However, the result of the religious gathering alarmingly dismantles the notion that "unity in diversity" existed among the communities living in the former Babylonian (and present Persian) province of Yehud. From the meeting cited in the opening of the chapter, the text proves beyond any reasonable doubt that the people's differences – in religious, cultural, social, economic, linguistic, and other aspects of life – mattered and negatively affected the community's life.

The people revisit the law given to past Israel and promise to do as the law said. In pursuit of that, the mixed community drifts to exclusivity, the temple is cleansed; Sabbath keeping is emphasised and trading is banned; the Hebrew language is revitalised; marriages are questioned,

and boundaries are drawn around the existing and prospective marriages; and those called for religious purposes, priests and Levites are positioned and urged to continue.

It was not only Israel's (the returned Israel from Babylon) group identity that was at stake, but also the group's religious identity. Therefore, the changes cited in Nehemiah 13 are very important for the returned Judeans as they helped them to form a recognised group identity around Jerusalem and subsequently national identity. However, in as much as they were trying to work on their group identity, the identity of some of the other groups around them¹ was also becoming clear of who they were. By embracing the changes, Israel was using the past to have an informed present and future based on the law.

The changes did not affect the returnees only, “the people of the land” were also affected. The phrase, “the people of the land” (עַם הַאֲרֶץ) may be interpreted in a couple of ways according to the context in which it is used or appears: (a) Genesis 23:7, the term refers to native dwellers of the designated land, the Hittites; (b) Leviticus 4:27, it refers to a community of the Israelites; (c) Ezra 3:3; and 4:4, it refers to other groups who were opponents of Israel, the Judeans who had not gone into exile inclusive.² In this research the phrase “the people of the land” (עַם הַאֲרֶץ) represents all the other groups in the designated land except the returnees. Nehemiah 13 names some of the people which fell under the category of “the people of the land” and the chapter also gives an idea of a society forming around inclusion and exclusion. Those excluded are referred as others/strangers and these are the: Ammonites and Moabites, Tobiah, some from Tyre, and women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.

Research Question / Research Problem

Given that brief background, this study asks this main research question: What constituted the identity of Israel and how was that established and/or advanced in the postexilic period according to Nehemiah 13? The group in question is the group of exiles who returned from Babylon

¹ Fensham 1982:124f;

² Paulo 2014, p. 49-50

according to Ezra-Nehemiah. Furthermore, in relation to selected scholarly works on group identity, I ask the following sub-question:

How do the enforced changes in the Judean community affect the community's intra-relations during the post-exilic period, according to Nehemiah 13? In the wake of introduced changes, what do we know of the inter-relations among the inhabitants in Jerusalem and Judah?

The above will be a question that will resonate in this study to help answer the main question of the investigation.

All around the world, identity is what clearly includes or excludes any human being in a more widely recognised category or group. Therefore, identities move a person from individual existence into family life and from a family into membership in a community. However, some traits of identity are inherited. One may be born in a clan, tribe or nation, and one has no control over that ascribed status which is at the core of one's identity. To a very large extent, that is what makes ethnic and/or national group identity.

My primary source of information would be the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the purpose of this study is to solely focus on Israel's formation of group identity in relation to Nehemiah 13.

Methods and Theories

In order to help us understand the text in question, I will make use of various analytical tools. The following methods will be used to gain a deeper understanding of the text:

Literary analysis – Using this method, the text will be dissected and closely looked at, how the words are used within the sentences and how they are also used within Ezra-Nehemiah writings more generally.

Historical analysis – With this analytical tool, the study will help the reader to look at the text historically for the Judeans in the post-exilic era. Areas to dissect will be the interaction of

religious life, political life and economic life of the people. This will help the reader to logically unfold Nehemiah 13 and the actors involved in that narrative.

Literary-contextual analysis – I will look at this writing, its form and composition in relation to the general text of Ezra-Nehemiah and the Torah. The issues raised will be delved into so as to give the reader an understanding of what really was going on and the reason for it at that particular time.

Theories: Identity Markers in Nehemiah 13 and Group Identity

Identity Markers in Nehemiah 13

In an in-depth expository of Nehemiah 13, this research targets the identity markers that are distinct for the group identity and consequently stand out as formation basis of the returned from Babylon group of the Israelites. There are six vivid identity markers that can be revealed in this Nehemiah 13. However, the six identity markers cannot be discussed without the first two on the list below:

1. the Babylon exile experience;
2. the Genealogy list (Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7);
3. Yahweh worshiping (v.1);
4. the law (v. 1);
5. the house of God (the temple) (v. 1, 4-5, 7, 9, 11);
6. the Sabbath (v. 15-22);
7. Language (v. 24);
8. no mixed marriages (v.23, 25-27).

Each of these or a combination of these helped in group border formation, enabling others to be included or excluded, and that is central in the life of the Babylon returned community.

The identity markers as borders:

The Babylon exile experience

The returnees from Babylon held and consolidated and passed on the belief that they alone were the legible Israelites. This is a narrow definition of a Jew as found in the book of Ezra³ at that time. This definition heightens tension in Yehud region between the returned Judeans (*the golah*), and ‘the people of the land’ (*the non-golah*),⁴ and the definition also creates a concretised border for those who are part of the group (in-group) and for those who are out (out-group). Hensel observes that the book of Ezra Nehemiah only recognises the returned Judeans as legitimate Israel and ignores those that were not taken into exile.⁵ In the first three opening verses of Nehemiah 13, the Israel of the returned community separates itself from those it considered ‘the people of the land.’ They view themselves as the only ones with the right to worship Yahweh.

The law

the past Israel dwelt on the law, thus the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the precepts contained in. Knowledge of the law, understanding it, keeping it, and passing it on to the next generation was heavily emphasised.⁶ Therefore, a return to the law was paramount in shaping and redefining the identity of the Israel of the post-exilic era. The law was to be same for both the aliens and the indigenous Israelites,⁷ however, failure to be inside the law meant being outside the group. Those who did not accept or did not want to live by the law, were excluded by the law too from the group. The law played a significant part in establishing and maintaining the group borders. First, it was the law about Israel not mixing with other groups of foreign descent (Nehemiah 13:2). However, in application of that law, all people, other than this returned group were considered as of foreign descent (Nehemiah 13:3). The law was continuously used to bind the community together. In instances where said to have been broken (Nehemiah 13:4-5, 10, 15-16, and 23), corrective measures accordingly (Nehemiah 13:8, 11, 19 and 22, and, 25 and 28).

³ Winslow 2018, p. 2

⁴ Edelman, Davies, Nihan, and Römer 2011, p. 68

⁵ Hensel 2018, p. 44

⁶ See Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Joshua 1:8; Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 8:2, 8

⁷ See Leviticus 24:22

1.1 The house of God (the temple)

In Nehemiah 13, the expression “the house of God” technically refers to the temple or temple of the LORD. This research prefers to use the phrase “the house of God” to the expression “temple or temple of the LORD”. In verse 1, the gathering itself in the house of God, is known as “the assembly of God”. Another phrase is in verse 4, where Israel claims God is hers by saying: “house of our God” (בַּיִת־אֱלֹהֵינוּ). Israel affirms the mutual relationship between herself and Yahweh, the god of Israel. The phrase “house of God” (בַּיִת־הָאֱלֹהִים) also appears three times in this chapter, thus in verses, 7, 9 and 11. Physically, the phrase, reminded Israel that the house of God was God’s dwelling place and consequently a place where as a community they could meet to fellowship and worship Yahweh.⁸ The past accord is appreciated: “I will be your God, you will be My people, and I will dwell in your midst.”⁹

One of the major reasons the king of Persia, Cyrus, at that time sent Ezra to Jerusalem was to see to it that the temple was supervised and built. To ensure its essence and continuity with the past Israel, the temple was rebuilt exactly where the old temple, the Temple of Solomon stood. The Yahweh worshipping community was to be associated with the Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁰

The house of God was to have its very vessels that had been taken away to Babylon restored to facilitate the continuity of practical worship rituals within the house of God.¹¹ With that in place, the post-exilic Israel was connecting with the pre-exilic Israel.

The significance of the house of God is that it offered the continuation of religious rituals such as presentation of burn offerings, New Moon sacrifices, sacrifices for all appointed sacred festivals

⁸ See 1 Samuel 1:7 - This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat.

⁹ Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 30:22

¹⁰ Paulo 2014, p. 154

¹¹ Ezra 1:7, 11. “Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god...In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.”

of the LORD, and give freewill offering to God. The importance and need of the house of God is emphasised through the act of offering burnt offering to God before the foundations of the house of God were laid.¹²

1.2 The Sabbath

Another important identity marker was the Sabbath. It had its own do's and don'ts as a law given to Israel. For Israel, this was important as it was ordained by Yahweh that the Sabbath was a day of rest and worship.¹³ In Nehemiah 13 the Sabbath observance law was broken because the in-group could not resist trading on the Sabbath as buyers of merchandise. The group faced both external and internal pressure in that the businesses on Sabbath were not only done outside Jerusalem but also inside. That necessitated Nehemiah to tighten security conditions at the entry gate (Nehemiah 13:19). Other stringent measures were also taken. This subject is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

1.3 Yahweh worshipping

By decree Israel was forbidden to have other gods besides Yahweh.¹⁴ This god needs to be served holistically.¹⁵ This worshipping of Yahweh was to be continued through the existence of the temple in Jerusalem which was key to Yahweh's worship. The worshipping of Yahweh alone, monotheism, was an identity marker that brought in distinct religious differences. Monotheism, as an identity marker, further differentiated who believed in one god and who believed in many gods, polytheism. It set the difference between Israel and other nations. This also marked the identity of Israel from others. The gathering of the Yahwist community led to recognition of Yahweh (who Israel was worshipping) as the only god. Other people who were associated with other gods were rivals to Israel (Nehemiah 13:1-3).

¹² Ezra 3:5-6

¹³ See Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15

¹⁴ See Deuteronomy 6:4; Exodus 20:3

¹⁵ See the second commandment of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:3 "You shall have no other gods besides me.")

1.4 Genealogy

From the onset, Israel was a nation with a well-established record of genealogy.¹⁶ During the post-exilic era, the genealogical list helped to identify who was in and who was outside the group of the returnees.¹⁷ Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 already show the systematic organisation of the group's identity by revealing a long list of those who were considered to be indigenous. This helped them to get linked to their descendants and to ground them as legitimate Israel. It also gave a continuation of the exile history in that the list of the returnees divides Israel. Thus, only those whose ancestors were in exile in Babylon were included in the list. Above all, it was a criterion for who was in and who was out, who was to be included and who was to be excluded in the identity group. The community that gathered to hear the law and worship Yahweh (Nehemiah 13:1-3) first it was a mixed community, but after separation it portrays an indication that all who remained were people who had an attested background associated with the exile in Babylon. It shows that the community had strong social bonds and that enabled them to easily keep on their historical past. It was easy to recognise those who claimed to have connections to the returned Israel. The ejection of Tobiah not only from the house of God but the community as well is a strong indication that Israel did not want to tolerate anyone who was not part of their in-group (Nehemiah 13:8).

1.5 Language and no mixed marriages

Failure for children to articulate in fluent Hebrew was immediately attributed to mixed marriages and their mothers are easily identified (Nehemiah 13:24). Those among the returned Israel community who had married women from the out-group were counselled on the issue, an oath was also taken (Nehemiah 13:25-26) to end any contemplations on such prospective marriage proposals to foreign wives. The action in verse 28, give an indication that the issue of mixed marriages also affected the priesthood family too. However, the result of such marriages among the priestly household was expulsion from the community as Nehemiah said: "One of the sons of

¹⁶ Genesis 29:31-35; 30:1-24; 35:16-18

¹⁷ Ezra 2:1-70 and Nehemiah 7:6-73

Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me.”

These two subjects are discussed at length in Chapter 6. I would leave the whole discussion of this to Chapter 6 for now.

With these identity markers, Israel was looking in the past to inform the present and the future of her commitment to living the accord that God had established with Israel’s forefathers.

With the measures cited above, Israel as a community as a reorganised community was being governed by both the ideal and the taboos, thus, they were a society thriving on the do’s and the don’ts.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah present internal tensions in the province in terms of those whose ancestors had gone into exile and were now returning ‘home’ (the *golah*) and ‘the people of the land’, who are usually understood to be those whose ancestors had never left the region but had been given farmsteads by the Neo-Babylonians (the non-*golah*). One of the underlying tensions on this can be attributed to how the returned Israel defined herself in the first three verses of Nehemiah 13. The earmarks of exclusivity are vivid, and the community became a willing participant in implementing exclusivism.

Characteristics of In-group against Out-group

Umaru Kamara and Charles Koroma assert that people in the in-group do anything possible to increase the group’s self-image and sometimes they say false statements about members of the out group or about the whole out-group.¹⁸ From Nehemiah 13, I would like to point out a few examples of the characteristics of an in-group that are shared in the text. There are several characteristics that can be picked directly, or that are either implied from the passage. In the above examples the community of the returned Israelites as an in-group are doing all that is possible to portray an

¹⁸ Kamara and Koroma 2015, p. 12

impressive image of themselves. First, they claim they are the custodians of the law while the out-group is not. They are the only ones with the right of worshipping Yahweh, their true God (Nehemiah 13:1-3). Tobiah is downgraded to a ‘pollutant’. The space he occupied has not just to be cleaned but to be ‘decontaminated’ (Nehemiah 13:9). The children born out of mixed marriages have serious problems of expressing themselves in the language of Judah (Hebrew) while those from the in-group articulate perfectly (Nehemiah 13:24).

Group Identity

One question that may come up is: How does group identity and ethnicity relate to each other. In this case under research, there is a slim difference between the two. The Group identity here means that members are bound within the group and collectively share some rigid traits whereas ethnicity is relational and requires social interaction with ‘others’.¹⁹ Ethnicity is contextually influenced²⁰ while group identity is not. Ethnic markers define differences between the groups²¹ and so does group identity.

Ethnicity theory is new in the scientific scholarly world as the term “ethnicity” was not used until 1941 but gained a wider understanding as a social-scientific concept in the 1960s.²² Scholars often use the term identity to render an equivalent of the term ethnicity. Going by this way of thinking means that this kind of identity is inherited. It is a blood lineage descending from a common ancestral line, and thus, is called, as we shall see below, a “primordial” identity. Therefore, the term applies to the Judeans who were from a common patriarchal lineage.²³ Using ethnicity theory makes it possible to look at Ezra-Nehemiah’s interests or point-of-view pertaining to the quest of bringing about change among the Yehud community.²⁴

¹⁹ Tronvoll 2007, p. 5 online

²⁰ Tronvoll 2007, p. 5 online

²¹ Tronvoll 2007, p. 5

²² Cromhout 2006, p. 73

²³ Berquist 2006, p. 54

²⁴ Berquist 2006, p. 55

When talking about change, here I mean change within an individual's personal life, and the change in community life. In trying to embrace the identity mark, the change brought both positive and negative effects in and among the people. Another point to observe is that this change had current and future benefits for the nation of Israel.

In research concerning ethnicity, scholarly debate evolves mainly around four theoretical approaches – the Primordial, Constructivist, Instrumentalist²⁵, and Materialist approaches.²⁶

The first theory is the primordial. According to this theory, ethnicity is fixed. It is embedded and inherited with some biological attributes and has a long cultural history.²⁷ Since this is “natural”, scholars such as Adlparvar and Tadros strongly agree that an individual is born in a tribe or group and that this fulfils the need of belonging.²⁸ With this theory, the cause for differences between groups lies in the strong cultural differences and the values attached to them between ethnic groups, which may result in a clash of culture and lead to a full blown ethnic war.²⁹

The second theory is the instrumentalist, and the advocates of this state that ethnicity is a personal choice which, in many cases, is independent from situational context or presence of culture. Ethnicity here is a means used by influential individuals and/or groups to achieve some specific goals at a larger scale, such as political ambitions, self-governance demands, access to power and resources, recognition and respect for groups' identity and culture, and fighting for minority rights.³⁰ Barth, Adlparvar and Tadros say that the maintenance of ethnic boundaries occurs through interaction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ across group lines.

²⁵ Reuter 2011, online

²⁶ Adlparvar and Tadros 2016, online. However, Berquist notes of the two main theoretical approaches to ethnicity theory of identity – Primordialism and Constructionism. There could be other terms that can be in used but this is not in the interest of this research now.

²⁷ Reuter 2011, online

²⁸ Adlparvar and Tadros 2016, online

²⁹ Adlparvar and Tadros 2016, online

³⁰ Reuter 2011, online

There are also contending views from other schools of thought that ethnicity cannot be a matter of choice.³¹ Conflicts will always arise if different ethnic communities compete for the same goal such as power, territory, ownership to resources and so on.³²

The third theory is referred to as constructivism, sometimes also known as social constructivism. In talking of the preferences of the constructivists, Green says:

...constructivism is one [a theory] used by most scholars today across the social sciences. It first overtook primordialism as the dominant paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to such anthropologists and sociologists as Fredrik Barth, Abner Cohen, Ernest Gellner, Aidan Southall, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who all agreed, for one reason or another, that ethnic groups – and/or nations – are the artificial constructs of modern elites for their own purposes.³³

The advocates of this agree that ethnicity is not fixed or open. So, these two extremes are rejected. The construction of ethnicity heavily relies on agents of social constructions – humans themselves. However, the consensus agreement is that both individuals and groups through social interactions create ethnic identity. This is beyond one's choice and it is susceptible to change according to the influencing social conditions.³⁴ The potential agents of this construction are both elites and ordinary people.³⁵ Reuter says that both the groups and the individuals in their way of relating do recognise the ethnic differences but do their best to have something befitting out of that interaction. Under this theory, conflict depends on the available chances to the group for them to reach their goals.³⁶ Another school of thought within this line says that ethnic groups are artificial, they are constructed and as a result, they can also be destroyed, fragmented, and deconstructed.

³¹ Reuter 2011, online

³² Reuter 2011, online

³³ Green 2006, p. 6

³⁴ Reuter 2011, online

³⁵ Adlparvar and Tadros 2016, online

³⁶ Reuter 2011, online

The fourth theory is that of Materialism. Proponents of this theory say that ethnicity identity cannot be changed but can only be made more tolerant and open minded.³⁷ In this case, while ethnic identity is natural and rigid, the person or the ethnic group chooses to look at new ideas and developments that can be accommodated without altering their ethnic identity. Adlparvar and Tadros both agree that there is no much literature about this subject but note that what brings about violence here is nothing but economic issues. Economic inequalities and the exploitation of the ethnically aligned groups leads to violence.³⁸

Of the four theories of ethnicity discussed in this research, I chose the primordial theory as it was close to the interpretation of ethnicity in my analysis of Nehemiah 13. There are several features in Ezra-Nehemiah that tally with the primordial theory. First, the returned group, its members are fixed, coming from an ancestry and at every point a member can be traced to his or her respective ancestor. The biological list determines who enters this group. It gives them recognition and belonging. Those that were not part of the list could not be part of the group. The borders of the group are rigid. Secondly, the differences that erupt between the returned Israel and the others mainly dwell on the following factors: cultural, customs, religious, ancestry and language.

Hypothesis

There can be no one single interpretation in reading Nehemiah 13. Reading the text in between the lines, one may discover that there are some insidious actions in the making. For instance, there is a struggle for group identity recognition, there is a struggle for power, as well as a struggle to maintain “holiness”, and so the problems go on in this mixed community. The group of exiles is in the process of emerging from loss of national identity, homeland, power, and the link with God through the temple. They are at the center of the contestation. Their reaction towards others is disclosed. The exiles, also called the *golah*, are in a contest with the non-*golah*, that is, “people of the land” (עַם הָאָרֶץ) – those whose ancestors survived the captivity and remained in the land.³⁹

³⁷ Reuter 2011, online

³⁸ Adlparvar and Tadros 2016, online

³⁹ Edelman, Davies, Nihan, and Römer 2011, p. 68

The terms, *golah* and *non-golah* are not preferred in this research especially in relation to Nehemiah 13. This is because in the text these terms are not written or expressed as “*golah*” or “*non-golah*.” However, the *exiles* are also in contention with other groups other than the Israelites. This research seeks to further reveal the dramatic divisions raised in Nehemiah 13 between the exiles and the “people of the land” in a bid to embrace an officially recognised ethnic identity status. Therefore, I hypothesise that reading this account with an informed mind, one is likely to see the intensity of “hidden” rivalry through the elements that brewed division and how the divisions led and cemented the group’s identity formation in the postexilic period in Yehud province. Through this project, I will demonstrate that there were initiated lines of division cutting through the communities and/or gatherings and the resultant effects of that.

Introduction to Nehemiah 13

All bible quotations used and reflected in this research are from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV).

Remarkably, Nehemiah 13 can be said to be the text of a “wake-up call” for both religious and ethnic identity awareness. It opens with the cardinal issue, the “life blood” for relating with God as a nation, an assembly of Israel before God – a spiritual issue at the heart of God.

I aim to come up with an in-depth systematic understanding of the spiritual and identity markers in the whole text of chapter 13, from separation in the temple to separation in the home, putting both spiritual life and marital life at stake. I will break this chapter into episodes (verses 1-3; 4-9, 10-14; 15-22; 23-27; and 28-31). The episodes will be discussed in detail one after the other and they will emerge as chapters. At each point, traces of boundary positions are being established or reinforced. These episodes build on each other towards the establishment of group identity or national identity. Therefore, the episodes will form the main basis of the discussion of this research paper. Though it may be possible to delve into these episodes from different angles and produce insightful results, this research looks at group identity of Judeans, particularly the Judeans who returned from Babylon in the early post-exilic era.

Episode 1 discusses the law, the Ammonites and Moabites, the curse and the actors and life of the Judean community in Jerusalem. Episode 2 takes up leadership challenges, external influence and the addressing of the problem of infiltration. Episode 3 examines Sabbath observance and discusses its origins; who was to keep the sabbath; when and why was it important for the sabbath to be kept. Episode 4 deals with the skills of operating a language, speech being singled out and analysed and in addition to that is the mixed-marriages issue in the Judean community.

In all the episodes there are also attempts to resolve the problems publicly (verses 3, 8 and 9, 11, 19, 22, 25, 28). The problems are vivid and Rom-Shiloni notes that Ezra-Nehemiah continues to deal with a community ravaged with internal problems, which had been circulating since the 6th century BCE.⁴⁰

Rom-Shiloni further observes that Ezra-Nehemiah reveals only one position of confrontation and that is “the people” or the returnees versus the “other” and that is the rest of the communities living in Yehud.⁴¹ Despite critiques that Ezra-Nehemiah favours the community of the exiles from Babylon, I strongly contend that for a national identity to be realised, one group has to prevail over the other or others and finally it is a success story that mostly makes it into the records. Though from another angle it may be viewed and be critiqued for objectivity, but facts are more important.

⁴⁰ Rom-Shiloni 2011, p. 129f

⁴¹ Rom-Shiloni 2011, p. 129

CHAPTER 2

2. Pre-Exilic and Post-Exilic Israel as a Group

Introduction

This chapter discusses Israel as an ethnic group at different stages that are important to the discussion of group identity. First, it gives a reveal of the characteristics of Israel's identity. Characteristics that were revealed and borne in the early stages of Israel as a nation and how those characteristics impacted on the group's identity or how they were modified and contextualised to suit the group's identity in the Second Temple period. Second, the research briefly tackles how Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah, was taken into exile, and third, the return of the exiles and emergence of Nehemiah and his contributions during his leadership period.

Israel as an Ethnic Group: Characteristics

During the period of return of Israel to Jerusalem, the group qualified to be identified as an ethnic group because it organised itself as a community-type group. This group shared the same culture, they embraced a common myth or legend of common ancestry.⁴² They had shared historical memories – shared the same stories of creation, in which the seventh day is blessed and kept as a day of rest, the Sabbath. Nehemiah warns the people who were not observing the Sabbath day as a day of rest (Nehemiah 13:15). The exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land was capitalised with some of the identity markers of the group embedded in some laws. They were to live as a community worshipping one God only (Exodus 20:3; Ezra 9:6-7 and Nehemiah 13:3). The land in which they were then (their ancestors), the land in which they then lived as descendants was so cardinal. Through king Solomon, the house of God, significant to Israel, was built in Jerusalem in that very land (2 Chronicles 3:1) and in Ezra 1-6, the foundations of the house of God were laid

⁴² Isajiw 1992, p. 6

and building completed. That gave returned Israel a communal relationship continuity with Yahweh. The public life of worship of Israel was reflected through the house of God (12:27-30). The roles of the custodians of the religious rites were also seen through the house of God (Nehemiah 13:13, 30). The communal religious life was in itself a fulfilled promise made by Israel and it was a sign that they were Yahweh's people. Other promises had to be fulfilled in this land which was now homeland of Judah. The identity of Israel as a community characterised how and what it was to be known of by both the in-group and the out-group members.

What the group border instilled in the life of the exiles was a sense of belonging, a sense of obedience to the leadership and a sense of uniformity to community members.

In the end, the interpretation of the law as found in the Book of Moses and as treated as contextual to the period of Second Temple period, during the rule of Ezra and Nehemiah is very crucial to the development and fulfilment of the vows of the Old Testament. Prior to the happenings in Nehemiah 13, the returned community had made some vows (a) to follow the Law of God given to them through Moses the servant of God; and, (b) to obey all commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD.⁴³ That meant Israel obliged herself to follow God's commands that were given to Israel. Of paramount to this research are commands relating to (a) worshipping Yahweh alone;⁴⁴ (b) keeping Sabbath day holy;⁴⁵. Therefore, the establishment of the house of God meant that this returned community could worship God as the past Israel did. With the house of God established, it enhanced their religious life. They started to learn more of Yahweh⁴⁶ through the reading of the Book of Moses. Not only did they learn but they also started to show and to live the law.⁴⁷ By so doing, they were collectively fulfilling the vows made just as the past Israel had promised God – “The people all responded together, “We will do everything the LORD has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.” (Exodus 19:8). Whether Ezra and or Nehemiah

⁴³ Nehemiah 10:29-31 gives more promises that are further discussed in this research

⁴⁴ Exodus 20:3

⁴⁵ Exodus 20:8

⁴⁶ Nehemiah 8 and 9

⁴⁷ The who Nehemiah 13 shows a community that tries to keep up with the vows by following the commands of the LORD. However, not all the people could live a life of the law as such lessons were picked from their personal and communal failures to follow the law.

interpreted the law following the Deuteronomic history alone or in combination of other Hebrew texts, is not known, what is cardinal is the effect and result of that in this context.

At this point, as we investigate this further, we cannot avoid looking at the number of the people to have an added understanding of the gravity of Babylonian war on Judah, otherwise Judah would have less meaning in Persian-period history. I now turn to the first three points that Berquist gathered from scholarly research.⁴⁸ It is at times important to take figures or reported numbers with suspicion. These could be any figures; money, products, population, e.t.c. Establishing the exact numbers and let alone proofing them would be an insurmountable task next to a total fiasco. Whilst that is the case, I do not imply or suggest in any slightest way that speculation should be employed either. What the sources in Yehud could have produced would most likely be different from what the Babylonians, the invaders, could have produced yet on the same historic event. For some reasons, the issue of propaganda is not ruled out here. The Babylonians, as a superpower at that time could have inflated the figures of those known to have been taken captives into Babylon and those relocated to conquered areas. That could have been done with a view to continuing sending fear or threat to other nations. On the other hand, the Judeans could have reduced their figures to show that the fight, though lost, they suffered minor losses and some of its citizens were captured. There is lack of sources from either Yehud or from Babylon that can give same figures of the account. There may be no known independent source so far. However, the biblical sources come from Yehud – 2 Kings 24 and 25.⁴⁹ Despite the absence of archaeological data from Babylon on the number of captives, what is availed in biblical sources still remains useful. However, numbers in text recorded for the same event can differ to any degree.

It may be an injustice to rely on one source of information knowing that for the writer, there is a thin slippery border of being factual and maintaining neutrality. Is it possible then in such cases to look for independent verification of the figures? That is a matter of historians to establish or to better present figures from both sides. The research will try to bring out the known possible figures detailing the exile and how some of that came about. Yes, the problem is the relationship between history and text: the biblical texts are not a mirror of an external reality. This must be addressed,

⁴⁸ Berquist brings together a number of essays which all have insights on the “Persian-period” and suggests what areas can be relook as scholars try to understand this period from different perspectives and approaches.

⁴⁹ For more details see 2 Kings 24:14-16, 2 Kings 25:11-12, Jeremiah 52:28-30 and Daniel 1:1, 6

that is, a critical investigation of the historicity of the texts; what is their value as sources for reconstructing the history of the exile?

Another notable thing now would be to really see who was counted according to the Jewish culture. At some point it was men only⁵⁰. And in other instances, it was both men and women except children. At some point it was men only but from a certain age and considered physically fit to be deployed in a battle field⁵¹ Did the writers, if neutral, use the same counting criterion as was used in the Jewish culture? We can take that into consideration too. We may not know exactly. This problem also occurs in the context with Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7.

I now turn to discuss the number(s) of those captured and taken into captivity from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Scholars like Albert put the number of those taken into Babylon at 20,000, but many say this is too high. The number is further reduced in 2 Kings 24:14 and it is said to be 10,000 and added to that verse 16, the number increases to 18,000⁵² thus 7,000 military and 1,000 other professionals, as those who were taken captives in the year 597. However, Jeremiah 52:28 slices the number further to only 3,023 Judeans as being taken to Babylon.⁵³ To some extent the numbers may pose a challenge, but they do not alter the incident to which they are attributed to. Oded Lipschits notes that in recent years scholars dealing with the population in Jerusalem in the Persian and Hellenistic periods estimates the numbers to be relatively low.⁵⁴ With discoveries from archaeological data excavated, the numbers continue reducing.⁵⁵ Lipschits further explains that:

[b]ased on the archaeological data, Carter (1994: 134–135; 1999: 148, 288; cf. Miller and Hayes 2006: 522–523) and Lipschits (2003: 330–331; 2005: 212; 2006: 32) estimated ca. 1,500 inhabitants in Jerusalem during the 5th century BCE, while

⁵⁰ Exodus 12:37; Matthew 14:21 (Mark 6:44; Luke 9:14)

⁵¹ See Numbers 26:2. Another case to consider is found on 2 Kings 24:8 a corresponding account of 2 Chronicles 36:9

⁵² See 2 Kings 24:14 and 16

⁵³ Redditt 2014, p. 77

⁵⁴ Lipschits 2009, p. 2

⁵⁵ Lipschits 2009, p. 3

Geva's (2007b: 56–57) estimation of the population in Jerusalem was about 1,000 people.⁵⁶

Two recent studies published in 2008 estimate that at least 400 people lived in Jerusalem during the time of Nehemiah. This is consolidated by Zwickel (2008: 216–217) estimated that the number of inhabitants before Nehemiah came to Jerusalem was around 200. Later, the number rose to 400 or 600 people. Finkelstein (2008: 501–507), through the analysis of the latest available archaeological data puts the population in Jerusalem at about 400 people, thus, men, women, and children.⁵⁷

Knowing the difficulty of having to deal with numbers, the author in 2 Kings 25:11 gives an indication that all the people who had remained in the city were taken and others in other places were also taken. “Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had gone over to the king of Babylon” – 2 Kings 25:11. It is not known exactly when this took place but will look into it later.

We are not aware of the exact figures of how many died before the war, when the siege started, and after the war. Hunger claimed some lives⁵⁸ and the actual war had its own death toll. The problem of numbers poses considerable complications especially that the total number of the Israelites at that stage was not document.

Setting the Scene: When and Where?

Two questions are paramount to settle the scene of the activities discussed in this thesis. First, when did the account of this narrative take place? Second, where do the activities happen? When does Nehemiah appear? Babylon fell to Cyrus in a bloodless takeover in 539 BC.⁵⁹ From the edict

⁵⁶ Lipschits 2009, p. 3

⁵⁷ Lipschits 2009, p. 3

⁵⁸ Klein 2000, p. 3. Farisani, *The Israelites in Palestine During the Babylonian Exile*, p. 72 gives further details about the siege and how it was carried out.

⁵⁹ Drane 2000 p. 188

(2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1 – 11) issued by Persian king, Cyrus,⁶⁰ the story takes place in the period after Babylonian exile. The historical events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah support this view and the events recorded revolve over a period of a century, from 538 BC when the exiles in Babylon started to return to Judah.⁶¹ Nehemiah returned to Judah as a governor after being appointed by the Persian King Artaxerxes I,⁶² who was also called Longimanus, 464–424 B.C.⁶³

The accounts given in Ezra-Nehemiah dealt with a few activities in Persia, but most of the activities are set in Judah particularly in the area surrounding Jerusalem.⁶⁴ The Persian Empire began with the rule of Cyrus the Great who ruled from 559-530 BCE.⁶⁵ The Persian period lasted till 330 BCE when Alexander the Great captured its capital Persepolis.⁶⁶ Ezra-Nehemiah as a book continued the history of the Judeans in Babylon, however, there was a monarchical call for them to return to Judah,⁶⁷ the emphasis was on their returning and how the Judeans ordered their events and activities in Jerusalem. This was the genesis of the continued history of Israel. The Second Temple was rebuilt, walls rehabilitated, Jerusalem secured. With that in place, the history of Israel in connection with Jerusalem as a cultic centre continued.

Authorship: The Nehemiah Memoir – NM and the Lists

Nehemiah himself wrote in the ‘Nehemiah Memoir’⁶⁸ (NM) about the period of his reign in the post-exilic Judah. There is overwhelming consensus from scholars that the NM passages were written by Nehemiah.⁶⁹ This shows that we can extract more of and about Nehemiah from his texts.⁷⁰ The memoirs of Nehemiah are the most authentic sources in terms of the immediate post-exilic history in Judea.⁷¹ Each of Nehemiah’s point of view has a historical value⁷² in Chapter 13.

⁶⁰ Ezra 1:1-4

⁶¹ Aaron and DeRouchie 2013, p. 428

⁶² Bolin, 2012, p.4

⁶³ Aaron and DeRouchie 2013, p. 428

⁶⁴ Aaron and DeRouchie 2013, p. 428

⁶⁵ Bolin 2012, p. 6

⁶⁶ Bolin 2012, p. 9

⁶⁷ 2 Chronicles 36:23

⁶⁸ See details, Nehemiah 1-1 – 7:72; 11:1 – 13:31

⁶⁹ Bolin 2012, p.11

⁷⁰ Grabbe 2004, p. 294

⁷¹ Clines 1984, p. 136

⁷² Grabbe 2004, p. 294

Jacob Wright says that the NM developed from a report about a building project into the restoration of Judah and in that course, it resulted in the compilation of Ezra-Nehemiah.⁷³

Deirdre N. Fulton says scholars are of the view that the NM is an older source coming before the book of Nehemiah, probably written by Nehemiah himself.⁷⁴ The portions mostly attributed to NM are 1:1-2:20; 4:1-7:5a; 12:31-32, 37-41; and 13:4-31. However, some scholars object to this list. Kratz argues that much of Nehemiah 1, 4-7, and 11-13 does not fall into NM category⁷⁵ Reinmuth looks at the originality and assesses that Nehemiah 5 and 13 are indeed part of the NM.⁷⁶

Other than the personal memoirs in Ezra-Nehemiah there are also many lists of names,⁷⁷ at least a dozen list. The following chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah give more details as to what kind of list type each one of them was. Fulton introduced the following lists: Ezra 2:1-70; 7:1-5; 8:1-14; 10:18-43. Each of these lists is distinct from the other. Nehemiah has the following verses of lists: Nehemiah 3:1-32; 7:5-68; 10:2-28; 11:4-24, 25-36; 12:1-9; 12:10-11; 12:12-21; 12:22; 12:23-26.⁷⁸ These lists are vital in the reconstruction of history besides archaeological archived sources.

Notable Similarities Between the Exodus Narratives of Exodus from Exile

I refer to two similarities that are crucial in this narrative of freedom from exile. In this postexilic exile return from Babylon the returnees are given articles. This narrative can be linked to past exodus of the Israelites in that before their departure to freedom, the Egyptian king, Pharaoh asked the locals to assist the Hebrews with valuables (Exodus 12:35-36) while king Cyrus, the Persian king, asked the subjects to help the returnees with freewill gifts besides money, silver and gold which he gave to Ezra (Ezra 1:4; 7:13-17). Next is the building of the altar. Moses directed Joshua

⁷³ Wright 2004, p. v

⁷⁴ Fulton 2011, p. 6

⁷⁵ Fulton 2011, p. 6, 7

⁷⁶ Fulton 2011, p. 7

⁷⁷ Bolin 2012, p. 10

⁷⁸ Fulton 2011, p. 1 and 2. In addition to that, Bolin add Nehemiah 12:31-42. For more details on the characteristics of these lists consult the following: Batten 1913, p. 71; Clines 1984, p. 45; Edelman 2005, p. 175; Halpern 1990, p. 95-96; Lipschits 2005, p.154-68; Rudolph 1949, p. 26; Schneider 1959, p. 37; Mowinckel 1964, p. 29-45; Japhet 1982, p. 84; and Williamson 1985, p. 29-32.

to first built an altar as soon as they crossed into Canaan (Deuteronomy 27:1-8) while the returnees also first built the altar before conducting any religious rituals – (Ezra 3:1-2).⁷⁹

Nehemiah and the Book of Nehemiah

The historical figure, Nehemiah, himself lived during the time of king Artaxerxes and worked as a cup bearer at the palace in Shushan.⁸⁰ The name Nehemiah means ‘God has comforted’.⁸¹

However, there should be a clear distinction separating Ezra from Nehemiah. Nehemiah 1:1, “The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah,” show that the Ezra-Nehemiah were two books but merged as one very early.⁸² Coogan confidently asserts that in the Hebrew Bible the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one, however, in Christian Bibles, they stand as individual books since late antiquity.⁸³ That view is also held by Steinmann who maintains that in the Jewish tradition the two are one.⁸⁴ Fensham also says, the two books, Ezra-Nehemiah, were one unity in early times.⁸⁵ Brueggemann and Linafelt adds that in long textual tradition, both Hebrew and Greek, the two books are one.⁸⁶ An early Jewish historian, Josephus (c. 37 – 100 AD) and the Jewish Talmud refer Ezra-Nehemiah to Ezra, and so does the oldest manuscripts of the Septuagint.⁸⁷ Origen (c. 185 – 253 AD) was the first writer to distinguish between the two books, which he named as 1 Ezra and 2 Ezra. In the Latin Vulgate translation, Jerome (c. 390 – 405 AD) named Nehemiah as II Esdrae (2 Ezra). In the English translations, Wycliffe (1382) and Coverdale (1535) called Ezra and

⁷⁹ Throntveit 1992, p. 22

⁸⁰ Nehemiah 1:1

⁸¹ Clines 1984, p. 136

⁸² Biblica: The International Bible Society, online (<https://www.biblica.com/resources/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-ezra/>). See also Clines 1984, p. 2

⁸³ Coogan 2006, p. 431

⁸⁴ Steinmann 2010, p. 12-13

⁸⁵ Fensham 1982, p. 1

⁸⁶ Brueggemann 2012, p. 397

⁸⁷ Biblica: The International Bible Society, online (<https://www.biblica.com/resources/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-ezra/>).

Nehemiah as “I Esdras” and “II Esdras” respectively.⁸⁸ Nehemiah was called II Esdras because it is the continuation of the same history and not that it was written by Ezra.

Ezra-Nehemiah show a connection between them and 1 and 2 Chronicles because the last words of 2 Chronicles are the beginning of Ezra 1:1⁸⁹ That shows a smooth flow of a continuation of details of a historical account in 1 and 2 Chronicles and in Ezra-Nehemiah. The books of Ezra-Nehemiah focus on the returnees from Babylon. The account covered three periods giving the return of three appointed leaders from Persia returning with some Israelites. The first period covered the return of Zerubbabel.⁹⁰ Following that was the return of Ezra the scribe⁹¹. The third and final account was of Nehemiah and his acts.⁹² It is the return of Nehemiah and his acts that are central to this thesis.

Most of the verses in this Chapter 13 are in the first person, thus, conveying a message they were written by Nehemiah himself.⁹³ The chapter gives details of Nehemiah’s deeds after the building of the wall.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The chapter has stressed vital information that contributes to the understanding of Israel shortly before exile and the return of Israel from Babylon. The problem relating to recorded numbers detailing the population of the nation of Judah before and after exile has been highlighted and a conclusion is that such variances are acceptable as long as they do not alter the historical account of the event. The chapter has also looked at the event that necessitated the release of the Israelites who were in the Babylonian diaspora. After the edict by king Cyrus of Persia, the super power of the time, some Israelites willingly started to return. These were instrumental in the laying and

⁸⁸ **Ibid** - Biblica: The International Bible Society, online (<https://www.biblica.com/resources/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-ezra/>).

⁸⁹ Clines 1984, p. 2

⁹⁰ Ezra 1:8, see also Ezra 2:2, 11; and 5:14. Though there may be problems in identifying this name, in this research this could be one and the same person.

⁹¹ Ezra 7:1 – 10:44

⁹² Nehemiah 1:1 – 6:19

⁹³ Grabbe 1998, p. 62

⁹⁴ Pakkala 2004, p. 212

building of the house of God in Jerusalem and later the city wall. This community of the returned Judeans is what which from this point onwards, the research tries to analyse with regards to their group identity formation.

CHAPTER 3

Episode 1: The Law and Separation - Nehemiah 13:1-3

Introduction

From this point furthermore, the research discusses in detail Nehemiah 13 episode by episode and verse by verse. Therefore, episode 1, ushers in a community gathered for religious purposes. A community gathered in solidarity and unite. A community that did not know what the effects that gathering were going to turn them into from that point onwards. A community that was obediently rooting themselves into teachings, principally in the Book of Moses.

In these verses, the people gather and read and learn from the Book of Moses. They found a ban on some ethnicities who were not to take part in Israel's religious worship. They finally separated themselves from other ethnicities. In this episode, the problem was mixing with other ethnicities. Immediately they became aware that they were not to mix with other ethnic groups, they did what was perceived as right – to separate from them. In that aspect, this episode will examine why it was necessary for Israel to separate from the Ammonites and Moabites and from the other ethnicities of that time.

Verse 1

“On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God,

What is being witnessed is an assembly, united in one action as they referred to the law as written in the Book of Moses. The occasion is unknown. However, Williamson notes that the silence of the verse to set a particular occasion suggests that the happenings foretold here happened in a

regular liturgical reading of the Word of Yahweh.⁹⁵ The community was being reshaped by the precepts in the Book of Moses.⁹⁶ It is clear that the chosen text at this gathering was community law detailed in Deuteronomy 23:4-7. What we have in Nehemiah's writing, is part of the text isolating the Ammonites and Moabites.⁹⁷

Before proceeding with the analysis of the verses 1 and 2, an insight on the Ammonites and Moabites and also on King Balak and Balaam are necessary in examining the text and the exclusions which are given in verse 3. Who were the Ammonites? What relations did they have with the past Israel and the now Israel? Who was king Balak? How was Balaam encroached into this narrative and why is it significant to understand his relationship with the past Israel and other ethnic groups at that time?

Ammonites and Moabites

In the first verse of Nehemiah 13, two ethnic groups are mentioned, and their mentioning is a clear evidence that at that time they were part of the inhabitants of the land of Judah. These two groups, the Ammonites and Moabites,⁹⁸ are banned from entering the assembly of God. The ban is indefinite due to the condition attached to it – even down to the tenth generation. However, some scholars have a different view. Emmanuel Usue asserts that it was possible for the Ammonites and Moabites who came after the tenth generation to be part of the assembly.⁹⁹ A closer look at this thought contradicts with the condition attached to the ban in Deuteronomy 23:3.¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere in Ezra-Nehemiah, the two groups are mentioned in a conversation in Ezra as part of groups which had held abominable traditions.

⁹⁵ Williamson 1985, p. 385

⁹⁶ Clines 1984, p. 236

⁹⁷ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 351

⁹⁸ Other vital details are given about these two groups as to why they were possibly banned from entering the Assemblage of God.

⁹⁹ Usue 2005, p. 232

¹⁰⁰ No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. Therefore, by expelling or separating from these two groups, the returnees were acting in accordance with the law, while striving for underlying purity within the law.

“The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites” – Ezra 9:1.

This verse gives a disturbing social background of what had been taking place over decades among the returnees. There are divergent scholarly views, from total rejection of the whole list to acknowledging the list in part. Breneman denies the existence of all those groups during postexilic but that the practices of the “surrounding peoples” is equated to that of the groups mentioned.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, Southwood, explains that only the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Egyptians could have been present during the life-span of Ezra.¹⁰² In the same vein, Lisbeth Fried, acknowledges the presence of the last four groups at that time.¹⁰³

At this time, at least ten generations had passed since the law was first enforced and to presume that it was now being reinforced to a group of people who did not exist in Yehud is rather problematic. My view is that these two groups, the Ammonites and the Moabites, were present at that time as there are no possible convincing indications pointing to their extinction. For instance, we hear of the Moabites carrying out sporadic raids into Judah a couple of times (2 Kings 13:20; 24:2) in pre-exilic time. Therefore, the group could not have faced extinction in just tens of decades.

Another reason comes from the following verses that mention a named person who himself was an Ammonite (Nehemiah 2:10, 19; 4:3, 7). The mentioning of Tobiah, as an Ammonite, not only sharply divides scholarly views that surmise that the Ammonites were no longer in existence during that time, but it also raises questions into his real identity. To ascertain that Tobiah was the only or last surviving Ammonite at that time is highly unlikely and would contradict verse 23.¹⁰⁴ Due to a number of inconsistencies, this calls for a renewed discussion on the issue of existence of the Ammonites and Moabites in post-exilic era particularly in the 6th-4th century BCE.

¹⁰¹ BRENEMAN 1993, p. 148

¹⁰² Southwood 2011, p. 52

¹⁰³ Fried 2014, p. 52

¹⁰⁴ Nehemiah 13:23 “Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.”

We do not know the law here but what we know are the precipitating results after a referral to the Deuteronomic law.

We do not know the law exactly or how it developed, if it was an earlier draft that was being worked on and used, it is not certainly clear.¹⁰⁵ However, what we have is some interpretation of the law which bans the other ethnicities from mixing with Israel for various reasons bordering on either ethical, cultural or religious life. Here, the Judah community reads the law and their interpretation on some of either the phrases or the whole law leaves us clueless as to why there was such developments. One specific example is that Deuteronomy 23:1-7 is open that after the tenth generation, the Ammonites and Moabites may be allowed to be part of Israel.¹⁰⁶ It is not known how Judah assessed these nations, but they decided to continue with the ban that was long imposed on these nations. Of course, I agree that the environment and the circumstances in which the decision taken and arrived at was fully assessed and that it was beneficial for Judean community. A better answer to justify or to condemn their decision is nowhere within my slightest possible thoughts.

Probably the interpretation of the Deuteronomic law is based on their historical past with the nations they had encountered in their history. Numbers 20-22 gives possible clues which I am not validating but can be adopted to explain this development.

Their journey from Egypt to Canaan fell nothing short of hostilities. In Numbers 20:18-21, the request to cross Edom through the main road only, is refused and Israel is threatened to be encountered with a heavy military action. Israel aborts their plan.¹⁰⁷ Later, they asked to pass through the king's highway of the Amorites, but the Amorites met Israel with physical confrontation, they waged a fully-fledged battle claiming lives.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 351

¹⁰⁶ See Deuteronomy 23:7

¹⁰⁷ See Numbers 20:18-21

¹⁰⁸ See Numbers 21:21-25 and Deuteronomy 2:33-34. In this battle, Israel won and got the cities of the Amorites.

This leads into having to turn to details that at this point of discussion are inevitable to leave out as I try to get to the grips with this text. I have to look at some of the ethnic groups of the time, thus the Edomites, Amorites, Ammonites, and Moabites in their relation to Israel. Another point of interest will be on Balaam.

The Amorites, and not the Ammonites, refused to give way to Israel to trek through their territory. However, the two kingdoms shared borders. It appears before the defeat of the Amorites of Heshbon, the Edomites and Moabites had been selling bread and water to Israel – (Deuteronomy 2:28-29).¹⁰⁹ With these details, the relations of Israel and other nations appeared estranged and irreversible, however, adding to that as a possible reason for excluding them from the assembly is explained in the following verse.

1.6 Verse 2

...because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.)

The Moabites obviously had heard of what Israel had done to the Amorites, and probably fearing of being disgraced they sought the services of a soothsayer¹¹⁰ – Balaam. He was said to be the son of Beor. He was hired by king Balak to curse Israel. Although his work was done in the name of a god, however, it appears that for this task, there was evidence that he was driven with a wrong motive and love for material gain.¹¹¹

He succeeded to lead Israel into sin (Numbers 25) contrary to what king Balak was seeking. In a battle with the Midianites, Balaam perished alongside the five named kings of Midian who had taken his counsel (Numbers 31:8, 16 and Joshua 13:22). Balaam was not a resident of Midian and the question at this point probably would be what he was doing in this territory. It seems he enjoyed international popularity as well. Possibility could be that even after the first curse upon Israel

¹⁰⁹ Clines 1984, p. 237

¹¹⁰ Joshua 13:22 describes Balaam as a “soothsayer.”

¹¹¹ Clines 1984, p. 237

which clearly turned out to be the opposite, he still looked forward to cursing Israel. His identity is questionable but lived in Amon which may link him to be an Ammonite. His identity and homeland are certain but need some validation. Two passages which need to be harmonised with another one, are quoted.¹¹²

King Balak and Balaam

At the time King Balak ruled over the Moabites, Israel was in their final stage of entering into Canaan. Fearing the Israelites who had encamped near the border with Moab, Balak seeks divine attention before he could go to war though nothing warranted that. To prepare for war with Israel, he seeks divine intervention. For that purpose, he engages a well-known diviner, Balaam. He sends messengers to call for Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the River, in his native land.¹¹³ David Clines, is of the view that Balaam was an Ammonite, or he is believed to have been residing in Ammon.¹¹⁴

Balaam had a strikingly an unfailing record of his performance, making him one of the most famous diviners of the time.¹¹⁵ As a diviner Balaam was an internationally renowned. King Balak gave Balaam a special welcome. The king followed Balaam to a border town, Arnon, to give him a hero's welcome into Moab (Numbers 22:36). King Balak expected a curse on Israel which meant Israel's defeat. There was no way the same God who had already given him the message would change. Through his oracles, it was confirmed Israel was blessed beyond measure.

King Balak took him to three different places where they could have a bird's eye view of Israel's camp, but three times Balaam pronounced blessings for Israel rather than curses. Let me add to say there was progression to this view, as they moved on to a higher height, the clearer the view became of Israel before they could cross River Jordan.

¹¹² See Numbers 22:5 "sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the River, in his native land. Balak said: "A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me." And Deuteronomy 23:4 "For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you." Himself also says this when he said the first oracle, "Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. 'Come,' he said, 'curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel'" – Numbers 23:7.

¹¹³ See Numbers 22:5

¹¹⁴ Clines 1984, p. 237

¹¹⁵ Numbers 22:6 says his performance was impeccable for both blessings and curses.

As a soothsayer¹¹⁶ Balaam is credited by the king of Moab for his impeccable work of having a trustworthy record of pronouncing blessings and curses¹¹⁷. Till that day Balaam had enjoyed years of local and international success. Although divination is performed in many ways, how Balaam was praised in relation to his work, raises an assumption that Balaam as a diviner was a specialist. He was specialised in blessings and curses.

However, despite being a specialist, he ended up uttering blessings for Israel. That was not an erroneous act, but I take it that Balaam was faced with a 'battle of the divine'. He was dealing with the same divine source and the god of Israel would not let the nation he loved¹¹⁸ perish at the hands of this nation. Shenk comments that Balaam remains an adamant seer testifying for the Israelites against his own will.¹¹⁹ Indeed the influence of the Spirit of Yahweh prevailed over him.¹²⁰

Also concerning Balaam, Unger sums up that:

although never called a prophet, he does the work of a prophet, delivering oracles, which bear, in every detail, the superlative seal of divine inspiration. "He is neither a "true prophet" nor a "false prophet", in the usual meaning of those terms. He is rather a pagan diviner used by Yahweh for the communication of His word and because the word is from God the vessel does not impact on the relevance of the message.¹²¹

However, in this research Balaam is seen in a slightly different way. From his record of work and his contact with the God of Israel, leads to the following:

The successful conversations that Balaam had with the LORD means that he personally knew the god called Yahweh, who coincidentally, was the same god Israel worshipped. In this circumstance,

¹¹⁶ See Joshua 13:22

¹¹⁷ See Numbers 22:6

¹¹⁸ Nehemiah 13:2

¹¹⁹ Shenk 1993, p. 46

¹²⁰ Noth 1968, p. 190

¹²¹ Unger 1952, p. 215

by divine, he was subjected to this god and could not speak anything other than what Yahweh put in his mouth.¹²² He knows his limits before God. He affirms care must be taken in delivering the words of this god. The God of Israel is not like any other god. Balaam finally confirms that Israel is indomitable. At this point in time, there is a possibility that Balaam's work had God's hand in it and that this incident dented his career because at this point (a) God was dealing with Israel, the nation he chose and loved¹²³ and (b) Balaam had a wrong motive at that time. The two reasons mean that as human, or as a being in alliance with some divine power, that power cannot defeat the LORD.¹²⁴ Balaam is heavily criticised in both the Old Testament and New Testament of the Bible – (Numbers 22:22; 24:25; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11 and Revelation 2:14).

Israel had not broken her covenant with God to deserve curses, therefore, Balaam's pronouncements upon Israel were rendered ineffective. The curse was turned into a blessing by the sovereign God of Israel who was in firm control of Israel and the whole situation.

The reasons for which the Ammonites and Moabites were excluded in Deuteronomic law tallies with the opposition which Nehemiah experienced. Sanballat, Tobiah and their named allies hired a prophet (Nehemiah 6:10-14) to threaten and probably assassinate Nehemiah.¹²⁵ The Ammonites and Moabites did not want Israel to pass through their lands or to be their neighbour but resorted to inflict harm on Israel. In this context, of the post-exilic period Israel excludes them probably on the same grounds.

Having looked at some of the ethnic groups and how they related to Israel, I now continue with the discussion of this episode.

The Moabites are not allowed to enter the assembly of the LORD. There are two reasons to this cause, first, they failed to help Israel as per Israel's request. Second, they hired Balaam curse Israel. The Moabites are held accountable for attempting to inflict misfortune on the people of Yahweh. Accompanying the Moabites are the Ammonites who are also under the same ban.

¹²² See Numbers 22:18-19, 35, 38; 23:11-12

¹²³ See Nehemiah 13:2

¹²⁴ See Numbers 9:6

¹²⁵ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 351

In the texts, it is not very clearly how the Ammonites earned the unfortunate ban according to the law which has a cross reference to Deuteronomy 7:4-7 which is being used in Nehemiah. Whether that is through some kind of a bilateral or multilateral alliance with another nation against Israel or whether it was through a matter of interpretation is not very certain.¹²⁶ What Nehemiah gives out is that both groups are not to participate in the religious activities of Judah for the given reasons. Nonetheless, Csilla Szechy observes that the inclusion of Ammonites and Moabites into the ban may be due to their bad behaviour towards Israel as well as their idolatry and sexual abominations practiced.¹²⁷ Williamson adds that the reference of the Ammonites is most difficult to harmonise in the Deuteronomic law, and Nehemiah chose to ignore any dilemmas about that.¹²⁸ Consequently, the law was effected on Ammonites.

However, it has to be put clear that the “law of Moses” is not defined in the Bible but is known in various ways such as “the book of the Law”.¹²⁹ In Ezra-Nehemiah, the book of the law is also expressed in other terms such as, the law of Moses, the Book of Moses, the law of the Lord, the book of the law of Moses, the law, the book of the law of God...all refer to one and the same law.¹³⁰

Since there are various upheld views, definitions, understandings and usages of the phrase “the Book of Moses”, technically one cannot fully and clearly explain it better without touching other words which are or may be often interchangeably used for that.

1.7 Verse 3

When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent”

¹²⁶ Neither Blenkinsopp nor Clines or Fensham come out clear on the point in question which I see as cardinal in what is happening in this first episode.

¹²⁷ Csilla 2009, p. 40

¹²⁸ Williamson 1985, p. 385

¹²⁹ Japhet 2006, p. 137

¹³⁰ Williamson 2004, p. 232. See also Sara Japhet From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns. p. 137 Commenting on the “law of Moses” she, says it is also known as: “the book of Moses” (Nehemiah 13:1); “the book of the Law” (2 Kings 22:8); “the book of the law of Moses” (2 Kings 14:6; Nehemiah 8:1); “the book of the Law of God” (Nehemiah 8:8); “the book of the Lord given through Moses” (2 Chronicles 34:14) and so on.

Prior to this “great separation” in Yehud, there were already signs of cracks in the religious setup between those whose ancestors had been taken captive and those whose ancestors were not taken into Babylon.¹³¹ It is vital to remember that the whole lifestyle of Israel around the Torah. Those whose ancestors went into exile seemed to appreciate YAHWEH (more, for they accepted and believed that it was YAHWEH who led them into captivity and the same YAHWEH set them free, therefore, Him alone was to be venerated.¹³² In foreign land, the exiles continued sticking to their identity. Through their memories they were reminded of where they came from and who really they were.¹³³ They developed the literature and that which was in their custody in exile underwent the redactor process too.¹³⁴ At this stage, having the same ancestry was not a convincing reason for one to be a member of this ethnic group, one had to have had the exile experience and be notoriously monotheist. Knowledge of the Torah was becoming part of the Judean national identity¹³⁵ at some stage, thereby establishing a rift between the returnees and the others.

Furthermore, scholars such as Berquist, recognise that the Yehud community was sharply divided on social grounds, as evidenced during the building of temple and also in cultic practices.¹³⁶ Douglas also contributes that there were unresolved tensions of land rights between the returnees and the local dwellers.¹³⁷ Usue asserts that land in Judah belonged to the returnees who had experienced the exile, (cf Ezra 2:1, 70-3:1; 4:3; 9:1-2; 10:10-11, 19; Nehemiah 2:20; 9:2; 10:28-30; 13:1-3). The other inhabitants were side-lined.¹³⁸ Despite all these tensions, my view is that the main cause of the division had to do with the said law and not particularly the whole *torah*. It could lie between how the law was interpreted or how it was understood or both to suit the prevailing context. Fried has a crucial observation on the law and says that understanding the law ensures that it will be observed.¹³⁹

¹³¹ Edelman, Davies, Nihan, and Römer 2011, p. 68 This was not a matter of choice – going into exile or remaining, therefore, for that to be deemed as a condition for belonging into a certain group was already a catalyst for division backed by some ideology.

¹³² Sitali 2014, p. 49

¹³³ Mursell 2005, p. 29

¹³⁴ Bloom 2011, p. 10

¹³⁵ Himmelfarb 2013, p. 96

¹³⁶ Berquist 2007, p. 4

¹³⁷ Douglas 2002, p. 3

¹³⁸ Usue 2005, p. 57

¹³⁹ Fried 2014, p. 60

These several social problems cited above, and I would also add to that, the “national” list¹⁴⁰ (Ezra 2:1-31 and Nehemiah 7:6-73) were generally enough to officially and practically aggravate the main problem. At this moment, I see a high level of certainty the making the reader accept or believe that the successful implementation of the law, to bar others, was fuelled by the already existing barriers. The community’s peace sagged and broke further, taking a remarkably historical twist between the returnees and the rest of the people in the affected communities in Yehud. Although this was a massive change mainly bordering on people’s religious and political affiliations, presumably it had support from the Persian government. To foster, exclusionism, retelling and reinterpretation of history and of the social environment respectively, should be done with the group’s interest.¹⁴¹

I must agree that this pericope leaves a yawning gap in details. Encompassed in the word “all” must have meant (a) the Israelites who had conjugal relationships with foreigners, and; (b) the ethnic groups who were not to be part of Israel.

The exclusion of those of foreign descent implies breakdown of marriages to some of the readers while to some that is a conclusion to be avoided. In this research my view is that affected mixed marriages either divorced or opted to leave the community or were expelled from the community.¹⁴²

Similarities and differences between Deuteronomy 23 and Nehemiah 13:1-3

In a short space, I would like to raise a point of difference in the law in EN and in the Pentateuch. To do that, I have examined the above cited passages to search for similarities and differences. A couple of them were picked as follows:

Deuteronomy 23:2-9 is against four nations from entering the congregation of the LORD while Nehemiah 13:1-3 prohibits two nations.

¹⁴⁰ The national list established who: (1) was an indigenous member (2) belonged to the priesthood family, and (3) had the right to land acquisition.

¹⁴¹ Cezule 2013, p. 17

¹⁴² See Nehemiah 13:28

In Deuteronomy 23:5, Israel is banned for life from having an alliance with the Ammonites and the Moabites. In Nehemiah 13:1-3, Israel is cutting off all ties with the Ammonites, Moabites and other ethnic groups. The list in Nehemiah is expanded but does not give the exact names of the included names on the list.

The groups are specified in Deuteronomy 23:3 and 7, thus the Ammonites and Moabites, and the Edomites and the Egyptians respectively while Nehemiah 13:2 talks of two groups, the Ammonites and Moabites.

At this point in time, the ban on the Edomite and Egyptians should have been lifted up although there was an option for continuity, the community's reaction was that they separated from all of mixed descent.

Both Deuteronomy 23:4 and Nehemiah 13:2 emphasise on the basic needs for life's survival but they both put it differently. Deuteronomy specifically mentions of "bread and water," while Nehemiah generalises to say, "food and water."

Both Deuteronomy and Nehemiah reiterate that Balaam was hired to pronounce a curse.

Deuteronomy 23:6 prohibits any form of an alliance with the outsiders, even friendship is forbidden, and this corresponds to Judah's cutting herself away from anyone of foreign descent in Nehemiah 13:3. Since the highest form of union and bonding with the outsiders was marriage¹⁴³ the Judahites needed to let go any form of union to gain their "true" identity.

Whilst in Deuteronomy 23:5, God talks of all Israel, by using the pronoun "you", in Nehemiah 13:2 that is "*hijacked*" and this group of the returnees, says, "Our God..." taking it as though the words were addressed to them only then and now (at that present stage).

¹⁴³ Nehemiah 13:23, 28

Finally, Deuteronomy 23:4-6 disallowed mixed marriages while in Nehemiah 13:1-3 the mixed marriage issue used as a canon for the exclusion of other ethnicities.

From these differences, a conclusion can be reached. These differences of the law in EN and Deuteronomy is an indication that the law is different from that found in the Pentateuch and therefore, there is room for the difference in interpretation of the law, and that is also affected by the prevailing circumstances in EN.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed that the establishment of having a community solely vested in the teachings of the OT derived from the Book of Moses laid and solidified the ethnicity of this group of the returnees. From the deep interaction of the Book of Moses the returned Israel realised they were a distinct group and needed to separate from those who did not belong to this in-group. Among the ethnicities which were not to mix with this returned Israel group were the Ammonites and Moabites. By excluding other groups, they were maintaining their long-established relationship which Yahweh established through the past Israel. Again, by keeping the other groups out, they are maintaining their religious and group identity. The points which may have led to the banning of the other groups from mingling with Judah have also been explained as bordering on hostility and idolatry worship. Notably we have looked at the contributions of King Balak and the famous Balaam to this narrative. Israel as a group about to enter into Canaan still remained protected from the curses that were to be invoked on Israel. A number of similarities and differences between this text, Nehemiah 13:1-3 and Deuteronomy 23 have been added to shed more light on the development of the episode.

Finally, Nehemiah tried to radically and comprehensively tackle the problems which were undermining Israel's obedient to God. Referring the daily life of Israel and what was expected by Israel according to Deuteronomic law did not tally at all. In this aspect, Israel had mingled with the people they were not to mingle with.

CHAPTER 4

3. Episode 2: Eliashib, Tobiah and the Alliance –Nehemiah 13:4-9

Introduction

This chapter briefly discusses the influence and the alliance that some of the named non-Jews had with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, and the reaction of Nehemiah. The strong alliance was possibly necessitated by the marital unions or fame. This alliance impacted the Jews in Jerusalem.

The episode

The episode is characterised by infiltration, lawlessness, and foreign influence. As a result of that, problems arise. The three most probable ones being: Tobiah, a foreigner and a once enemy of the wall building project finds himself dwelling in the temple; then disorganisation in the temple; and, the collapse of tithing.¹⁴⁴

In this episode (verses 4-9), a deeper scrutiny of Eliashib's the position gives shocking results. It is shocking to see how he misused the sacred place, displaced the materials of the temple such as grain offering, new wine, oil and other items to accommodate Tobiah.¹⁴⁵ Nehemiah demanded the restoration of the original use of the place (v.9).¹⁴⁶

However, verses 10 – 13 cannot be easily weaned off from this episode as they play an important role in giving the results of Eliashib's risk of accommodating Tobiah in the temple space.

The name Tobiah gains considerable recognition in Ezra-Nehemiah writing. It appears many times but two times the name is enlisted among those families who could not be found as coming from

¹⁴⁴ See Nehemiah 13:4-5 for more details

¹⁴⁵ Williamson 1985, p. 380

¹⁴⁶ Williamson 1985, p. 380

exile. This meant that Tobiah was not a Judean national. There are various possibilities of how the descent of Tobiah is viewed. Three suggestions are that: (1) he came from a Judean family that was well-established and gained some power in Ammon; (2) he was of mixed parentage of Ammonite and Judean; and (3) he was either a descendant of the transjordan tribes as evidenced by his habitation in the Israelite transjordan land.¹⁴⁷ Tobiah's background can be categorised in a group of foreigners who had a long history in the land. As rivals to the progressive work in Jerusalem, Tobiah, Sanballat and the others claimed they were settled there long ago by the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon.¹⁴⁸

Mostly the name is associated with rivalry – Nehemiah 4:1-23. Nehemiah met Tobiah, who was one of the government dignitaries in Samaria and that gives an impression that he was of the other nation. He probably rose to power through “judicious use of force” and there is a high possibility that Sanballat and Tobiah, gained support of the religious leaders such as Eliashib who had relationship ties with Tobiah.¹⁴⁹ It is, however, important to note that Eliashib's grandson had a marital union with the daughter of Sanballat, hence such cordial relationship was possible.¹⁵⁰ I would like to add that the relationship they had was founded on illegal mixed-marriage going by the precepts of Book of Moses in OT. It was a socially acceptable mixed-marriage but not legally legitimate. Again, Tobiah's closeness to religious leaders and Eliashib in particular had to do with economic status of Tobiah.

1.8 Verse 4-5

Ne 13:4 Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah,

Ne 13:5 and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.

¹⁴⁷ Lai 2014, 208 and 209

¹⁴⁸ Ezra 4:2

¹⁴⁹ Asthon 1992, p. 135

¹⁵⁰ Fensham 1982, p. 261

Tobiah, both as an Ammonite and as a foreigner gained access to the temple chamber through a leader named Eliashib. Eliashib's identity is uncertain as the name is either mentioned with or without the title of priest or high priest (Nehemiah 3:1, 20-21; 12:10, 22 and 13:28). His title as everywhere else is missing here and that gives uncertainty of his proper identity.¹⁵¹ Could it be that he was a temple official but with a similar name.¹⁵² Although he is mentioned as high priest, it was very unlikely that a high priest would have the managerial position of looking after store-rooms.¹⁵³ Eliashib is mentioned to distinguish him from his namesake who is mentioned shortly afterwards. Eliashib's duties were like that of Meremoth (Ezra 8:33).¹⁵⁴ That was not close to the duties of the Chief priest (Numbers 3:4; Judges 20:28; Exodus 20:1-37; Leviticus 24:1-4, 16:2, 12-13, 23:6, 11,15, 20). Williamson concludes that Eliashib was not a high priest but had an interest with Tobiah.¹⁵⁵

Tobiah profited from Nehemiah's absence. He found favour in Eliashib's eyes and then some temple chamber became his dwelling space. Understandably, the rooms were for storage of items (*grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil*) intended for the cult and also used to support the gatekeepers, singers, Levites and priests.¹⁵⁶ This act could have affected a number of temple officials. Knowing that music was paramount for worship, it appears the rooms hosting the musical instruments were not affected.

On one hand, Tobiah's presence in such a place of honour, showed that he enjoyed good relationship ties with some leaders in Judah. On the other hand, Tobiah was a constant threat to Nehemiah's life and works (Nehemiah 6:17-19). The fact that he is given a place to live in the temple rooms confirms possible alliance with prominent leaders. However, Tobiah's presence at the temple showed one of the worst forms of law violations by a leader of the community. It is a secularization of that set apart for religious use.¹⁵⁷ Eliashib, the high priest, defiantly and openly breaks the law – an Ammonite must not come into the congregation of the LORD.¹⁵⁸ As a custodian

¹⁵¹ Williamson 1985, p. 386

¹⁵² Fensham 1982, p. 260

¹⁵³ Clines 1984, p. 239

¹⁵⁴ Blenkinsopp 1988, p.353-354

¹⁵⁵ Williamson 1985, p. 386

¹⁵⁶ Fensham 1982, p. 261

¹⁵⁷ Coggins 1976, p. 197

¹⁵⁸ Deuteronomy 23:3

of the law, Eliashib, the high priest set a bad example to a community struggling to keep up with the law to maintain its purity.

1.9 Verse 6-7

Ne 13:6 But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission
Ne 13:7 and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God.

Nehemiah recounts that while that was happening, himself was away on an official mission in Babylon. Upon his return, he found Tobiah living in the Temple rooms. Though Tobiah was there on Eliashib's permission, his presence according to the law, was tantamount to squatting in there. In Nehemiah's view, Eliashib's help to Tobiah, was equated to an evil act because he housed Tobiah in one of the consecrated places – the house of God. It was so displeasing.¹⁵⁹ The act is evil as it was a defilement in the house of God, but also his presence had some political influence capable of destabilising Judah.

Therefore, needing no gentle treatment, Nehemiah's strong reaction to Tobiah's removal from the temple space was in line with the agreed law (vs 1-3) which resulted in Israel separating from foreigners. In addition, the nation was gaining momentum around observing the Pentateuch law which banned Israel from mingling with other nations. In this normative stage of the nation, Nehemiah's reaction, then, was not only an exclusion of the foreigners among Judah but also a restoration of the law. What Nehemiah did was a strong message to the leadership, particularly to Eliashib, and to both the returned exiles and the non-exiles that the law, banning Israel from mingling with others had to be upheld at all costs.

The danger of the serious effects of this law as portrayed is that any mixing with Israel would bring a potential degree of calamity upon Israel. It appears even one foreign person among Israel would

¹⁵⁹ See Nehemiah 13:7 and 8

be “contagious” for Israel such that all aspects of Israel’s lifestyle would be corrupted. Hence, this being the presumed case, Nehemiah needed to act swiftly. Tobiah, had infiltrated the physical boundary of Jerusalem and further progressed to even live in a place considered to be sanctified and holy. He had penetrated into both the political and religious structures of the Judeans. Living in the temple was another form of an abomination at a higher level of tampering with leadership and orchestrating confusion.

This was a collective law for one Israel. Its fragility can be viewed from two possible angles of the same object: (a) for it to be broken by the whole group, it only needed to be violated by at least one person, by getting into any form of an alliance with one or more people outside the group, and (b) and to make Israel break the law, it only took one person or more or a group of persons to form union with any member in the group of Israel. It must be noted that any such a union was illegal. Therefore, this law hinges on each member’s conscientious within the group. Each one has to keep an eye on the other to avoid possible negative results which could befall the whole group.¹⁶⁰ For continued peace with Yahweh, trust for one another was also necessary. Having said this, perhaps Nehemiah’s coming back to evict Tobiah was after such a tip off.

Having analysed the law, I pose: Was Judah ready for this law? How ready was Judah not to infringe this law? The flaws exhibited in Ezra-Nehemiah show a community that had problems in keeping up with the law. In Ezra 9-10, the wrong was identified long before Ezra, but it appears there was either no one to challenge the leadership which partly was involved in mixed marriages affair or such responsible institutions were ineffective. In Nehemiah 13, there is a problem with the leadership at an advanced level and it is compounded with the involvement of the priestly family defiling God’s covenant through mixed marriages as well.

1.10 Verse 8

Ne 13:8 I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah’s household goods out of the room.

¹⁶⁰ See the reaction of a group of people who approached Ezra seeking for correction of the matter – Ezra 9:1-2

Tobiah's whereabouts at the time Nehemiah reacted is not known as the author prefers not to inform the reader. Throwing out Tobiah's luggage was so instrumental because in the end, he is forced to move out of the rooms together with his foreign influence.¹⁶¹ The reasons against Tobiah were not stringent targets against him but were, as Nehemiah saw it, necessary moves towards maintaining religious purity within and inside the temple. In the words of Olyan, he was seen as a 'pollutant' – "the source of the pollutions, the text implies, is the presence of Tobiah the Ammonite, his belongings, and those of his house".¹⁶² This means he was a threat to the whole ethnic group of Judah.

Throughout human history, some people of fame and influence have used their fame or power or just merely support to influence the leadership to benefit themselves. This story of Tobiah trails the same path. Temba assets that the trio, Sanballat the Horonite, Geshem the Arab, inclusive Tobiah the Ammonite, they were wealth foreign investors in Jerusalem. Though they owned much property, it was not theirs as foreigners. Therefore, if Nehemiah and others had wished, they could go further to strip them off their property by expropriating it.¹⁶³ I strongly support the move taken by Nehemiah to save Judah from possible contamination from foreign sources. Judah would have dragged herself back from embracing purity which was being propagated by people like Nehemiah.

What mattered most at this time were issues of both group identity and purity. For Nehemiah, a person like Tobiah was not allowed to enter into the temple arena and even worse to be given space in the holy sanctuary.¹⁶⁴ His marital ties with a Jew undoubtedly gave him some power to act as he did. He also fervently opposed Nehemiah's building project (Nehemiah 6:10). Eliashib's acts were a severe drawback to the reforms the Judean community embraced in the first three verses (vs 1-3). While Nehemiah was doing everything possible to please Yahweh, Eliashib was also doing everything possible to please one man, Tobiah. This was for so because the two, Eliashib and Tobiah, were close. They were linked together either through friendship or family ties. Tobiah lodging into the temple should have been a known issue to the leaders of temple but their silence

¹⁶¹ Frevel and Conczorowski 2011, p. 19

¹⁶² Olyan 2004, p. 10

¹⁶³ Rugwiji 2013, p.73

¹⁶⁴ Fensham 1982, p. 260

on such a vital matter or their failure to dislodge him could be that either they agreed with his presence there or they ignored the law governing the separation of Israel from Ammonites or Moabites (Deuteronomy 23:3).

Tobiah's continued stay in the temple rooms indirectly impacted contributions from the community. In Chapter 10:37, the community promises to give continued support to the house of the LORD as Judah said: "We will not neglect the house of our God." With a workable system in place, the Levites were mandated to collect all the tithes in the cities and towns under the supervision of a priest. Later, the Levites, took the tithes to the storage rooms in the Temple for the priests. However, with the situation of Tobiah taking over some space and probably people's reactions, the system gradually ended, and the Levites were forced out to look for other means of taking care of themselves (Nehemiah 13:10).

Nehemiah, as a governor of a province run by the Pentateuch law (Ezra 7:25), had official power over temple affairs as he does not seem to have been acting on personal interest.¹⁶⁵ The presence of Tobiah in the temple courts reveals lines of divided political loyalties in the province because of the province's established autonomy over its neighbour nations.¹⁶⁶

1.11 Verse 9

Ne 13:9 I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.

Nehemiah used the word purify. Israel understood that word correctly as it was part of their religious ceremonies. It already created an impression that Israel had been in contact with a "contaminant" and therefore needed to be "disinfected" or cleaned before. Thus, Tobiah was seen as a "contaminant" and deserved not to live in the temple space. Nehemiah gave orders to have the rooms cleaned, before he could personally put back everything that was displaced.

¹⁶⁵ Clines 1984, p. 240

¹⁶⁶ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 355

Despite the manner in which Nehemiah handled the eviction of Tobiah, his aim was welcome, to restore sanity and intended use of the rooms.¹⁶⁷ It must be noted that while verse 5 and 7 talk of a room, verse 9 pluralises that. However, what we have is that the whole occupied room was purified.¹⁶⁸ That change of pluralisation cannot be easily established as to what exactly was meant by that. However, what we have is that the whole space that was occupied by Tobiah is repossessed and items are rearranged again.

Conclusion

Judah's success as a nation depended on her sound relationship with Yahweh. To maintain this, Judah determined to separate herself from other peoples. But to do this, Israel needed to have her own designated land where autonomy could be fully realized and embrace the Pentateuch law. Once in her own borders, then she had the full autonomy to eject others. All those that fell short of criterion set for identifying the true Judean were to be removed mainly by law and by adherence to the group. The Judeans as one community under acceptable laws were now making a border. The boundary differentiating them from other groups were 'drawn'. The Judeans had to protect what was within their borders, thus by doing so, they established their identity as, monotheists, Sabbath keepers, people who had experienced the exile, as a nation under god's law, and so on.¹⁶⁹ With these distinct features, they referred to themselves as "us" and others as "them". With their religious stand, they claimed they are the only group worshiping God.

Finally, this episode had addressed the episode that dealt with leadership morality, failure to stand for purity and what God demanded from Israel. I have also discussed a notable figure of influence, here known as Tobiah the Ammonite, whose continued stay in the temple space had negative consequences on temple worship. Tobiah's unceremonious removal from the temple chambers was both a warning to leaders as well as to all foreigners to abide by the law governing Israel's ethnicity. Although Nehemiah's act may be viewed as personal or political, he diligently served

¹⁶⁷ Williamson 1985, p. 387

¹⁶⁸ Williamson 1985, p. 387

¹⁶⁹ Winslow 2018, p. 7. This is unpublished work entitled, Ezra's "Holy Seed": Marriage and Othering in the Bible.

and saved a possible collapse of temple worship due to apathy or decaying morality among the leaders.

CHAPTER 5

5. Episode 3: Sabbath Observance – Nehemiah 13:15-22

Introduction

This Chapter focusses on the Sabbath day. As one of the identity markers for Israel, the Sabbath day needed to be observed and kept as the law suggested. Socially, it differentiated Israel from other ethnic groups as Israel through this day showed a systematic pattern of worshipping their god. In this Chapter tries to bring forth the background and the importance of the Sabbath and how it was defiled.

Therefore, in this episode there are several issues which all are related to the profanation of the Sabbath day. It was believed it was the profanation of the Sabbath day which led Judah into exile.¹⁷⁰ Nehemiah observes the Sabbath violation and is urged to act. The violators are identified and finally steps are taken to avoid further violation of the Sabbath law.

Introduction of the Sabbath Observation

The seventh day, the day God rested after creation, he blessed it and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3). The Sabbath was given to the Israelites and it was to be observed by them (Exodus 31:13; 35:1). The prophets too emphasized on Sabbath keeping as well (Amos 8:5; Jeremiah 17:21-22; Ezekiel 20:19-20). Sabbath observance became a law with high punitive measures for any law breaker of the Sabbath observance law, for instance, a man found picking wood on the Sabbath was caught, brought to the gathering and the judgment passed in the hearing of the people. The congregation dragged the man outside the camp and stoned him to death (Numbers 15:32-36). In this case, death reflected the severity of defiling the Sabbath law. When Moses received the decalogue at Mount Sinai, this day of rest retained as a written law. It was publicised and extended to the Israelites as

¹⁷⁰ Holmgren 1987, p.152

fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments. At this point, the seventh day was showing how dynamic it was turning into. From then on, the Sabbath day was to be celebrated regularly – every Sabbath.

The Hebrew OT Bible gives the following further details about the Sabbath: The seventh day later became to be known as the Sabbath day (Exodus 35:1-2, 31:15-17, and Leviticus 23:3). It came with everlasting personal and communal obligations and restrictions. No form of work was to be done on the Sabbath. Even the provision of manna was halted. All food to be eaten on the seventh day was to be prepared on the sixth day in the evening (Exodus 16:22-26).

Sabbath was solely a day of rest; anyone found working was to be put to death.¹⁷¹ It was also an everlasting covenant between God and Israel to be celebrated forever (Exodus 31:15-16). Keeping the Sabbath was mandatory for Israel as required by God. Anyone profaning the Sabbath was to be put to death (Exodus 31:14-15).

The Sabbath also came with the following restrictions – no lighting of a fire in the living places (Exodus 35:3) and that meant no cooking; food was to be prepared in advance (Exodus 16:23); movements were restricted to within the house (Exodus 16:29); and, it was not allowed to carry any form of load (Jeremiah 17:21-22). In the Decalogue, all forms of work are banned (Exodus 20:10). It must be noted that before the decalogue was given to Moses, the Sabbath observance law was already in operation (Exodus 16:25-26) and the violation of it is highlighted (Exodus 16:27). The preceding verse (Exodus 16:28) indicates that the law was already known.

1.12 Sabbath Offering

The observance of the Sabbath came with personal obligations, one was to fulfill the prescribed offerings too (Numbers 28:9-10).

¹⁷¹ Japhet 2018, p. 89

Becking asserts that in Judaism Sabbath keeping is a vital identity marker and it is still an important day in the Jewish culture.¹⁷²

The Hebrew Bible designated days, as first, second, third, fourth, fifth, six and seventh. The commandment was in relation to the seventh day preferably referred to as the Sabbath. This law can be said to be one of the first to be instituted long before Moses received the decalogue.

The Sabbath was important for Israel and her future generations. Nehemiah recalls this: “You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses” (Nehemiah 9:14). As it was a known law, the violation of the Sabbath was a punishable offence for Israelites. The law demanded that anyone found guilty must be put to death: “Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people” (Exodus 31:14). Indeed to Israel the Sabbath day was holy. Despite the results of breaking the law, for some unknown reasons, Israel went ahead profaning the Sabbath. Though they had a wall as a physical boundary,¹⁷³ it could not stop the traders and the Judeans in Jerusalem from trading on the Sabbath day.¹⁷⁴ Nehemiah still called for Judah to observe the Sabbath as a holy day. The other ethnicities in and outside Jerusalem who did not know Yahweh had no Sabbath and therefore, the Sabbath law was not part of them. They were outsiders. Three times, Nehemiah warns the people in this episode. Since every trade involves at least two parties, he warned both the sellers and buyers. He warned the leadership too and reminded them of Israel’s fate. Finally, if the traders just ignored the warning, he promised to physically combat them. It was that promise that turned away the traders from entering the gates of Jerusalem.

1.13 Verse 15

¹⁵ In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they

¹⁷² Becking 2011, p. 118

¹⁷³ Nehemiah 6:15

¹⁷⁴ Nehemiah 13:20

were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day.

Nehemiah observed that the people were engaging themselves in business on the Sabbath day. We do not know how he found out especially that this affected many people from different places in and outside the parameters of Jerusalem.¹⁷⁵ This research cannot establish whether the laws surrounding the Sabbath day, such as the one restricting movement on a Sabbath day were at this time in full operation. Maybe if this law was operational it could have affected Nehemiah's investigation of the issue.

Nehemiah noticed that it was a routine for men of Judah to forsake the Sabbath day and get engaged into trade. Nehemiah gives us the circumference of where this is happening, in Judah. And the center of the problem was Jerusalem. Traders flowed in and out of the gates of Jerusalem disregarding the Sabbath and minding trade only. The traders, most likely men of unknown identity were making wine, bringing grain and loading it, together with other merchandise and among them wine, grapes, and figs. All this was destined for Jerusalem, and ready for business on a sabbath day.

The time of events in this account is fixed by the date of the grape-harvest, thus, September-October. The grain would have been harvested in earlier months and the figs of that season would be the late, autumn, figs (Jeremiah 8:13).¹⁷⁶

The sabbath being probably considered as a potential market day, the Jews in the city may have been flocking there in numbers.¹⁷⁷ Jerusalem had the Fish Gate as its trade market centre.¹⁷⁸ The coastal region from Dor to Ashkelon had trade centre. However, further inland another well-known commercial settlement was located at Marissa, presumably run by the Sidonians.¹⁷⁹ The variety of the viable business centres shows that, it was not only the Jerusalemites breaking the sabbath law

¹⁷⁵ Williamson 1985, p. 395

¹⁷⁶ Clines 1984, p. 242

¹⁷⁷ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 360

¹⁷⁸ Fensham 1982, p. 263. See also Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 360

¹⁷⁹ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 360

but also other Judeans in Judah. This drew Nehemiah's concern as this was a problem with a disastrous ending. However, in the Pentateuch, there was no specific law to be quoted against matters leading to this vice.¹⁸⁰ Nehemiah notices the continued violation of the Sabbath observance law by Judah. The consequences are quite catastrophic (Jeremiah 17:27). So, how was Nehemiah going to implement the sabbath observance law in a situation of mixed ethnicities where it would not have binding effect on non-Judeans? At this point a detailed review of the Sabbath commandment and its implications renders help:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work,¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God...Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11).

However, a closely related incident to the EN account, which cannot be skipped, is the one reported on Jeremiah 17:19-27. The similarity between these passages is that they forbid transportation of goods through the gates of Jerusalem and that any violation of this would eventually lead to the destruction of Jerusalem. Nehemiah took a strong stance on the interpretation of the Sabbath observance law which is in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. The law did not only affect the treading of grapes, but any form of work and prohibited any form of exchange of goods in any medium. Finally, it appears Nehemiah's successful implementation of the sabbath law ended up with the abolishment of the sabbath market.¹⁸¹ That law also required rest of the animals which played a very important part in the trade as they were used to carry loads of goods.

1.14 Verse 16

Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah.

¹⁸⁰ Coggins 1976, p. 141

¹⁸¹ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 359-360

The Phoenicians, thus the Sidonians and Tyrians, were very famous for their sailing and trade skills (Isaiah 23:2-3, 8 and 18)¹⁸² and business negotiations. They became so successful in wealth (Ezekiel 28:5). The region of Tyre had successful businesses (Ezekiel 27:12-36) and traded with other nations, including Judah. The men from Tyre who also lived in Jerusalem brought in fish, and other items to sell right in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Most of the fish was sold at the market by the Fish Gate.¹⁸³ And the people of Judah, were buying on the Sabbath. Since the Tyrians were skilled in business, we do not know if on the sabbath they had special sales such that that largely affected the gatherings at the temple. Due to preferring trading to sabbath keeping, the Judean community was living in danger of the consequences of breaking the Sabbath commandment. Nehemiah's problem was that trade on the sabbath was a potential recipe for the Judeans to break the sabbath observance law.¹⁸⁴ The Tyrians, being not part of the returned exiles, were not affected by the Sabbath observance law, hence, that was another technical problem for Nehemiah to handle. Foreign influence (vs 16) had successfully influenced Israel in breaking the keeping of the sabbath as holy and that meant Israel was lacking blessings (Isaiah 56:2, 6). To apply the same measure of the law, the Tyrians too needed to be bound and governed by the same Sabbath observance law. The law needed to be applied equitably on all the Judeans and other inhabitants for it to be effective within the Judean community in Jerusalem and in Judea. Apparently, the vivid result of that was that the religious laws were neglected, public worship was affected, sacrifices became disrespected.

As an identity marker, Sabbath keeping was given to Israel. Israel was to exercise total obedience to the law to avoid coming into confrontation with their God. It was not possible for the same law to be extended to the traders in question as the law was not revealed to them by God and possibly had nothing to do with the God of Israel. The binding nature of the law was inclusive for Israel and exclusive of the other nations. Sabbath observance differentiated Israel's God from the gods of other nations. It marked who was to worship this god and clearly identified was to be worshipped. It clearly identified: who was to worship this god; when and where this god was to

¹⁸² Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 359. More details on that are found in the Hebrew, Ezra 3:7, Amos 1:9-10.

¹⁸³ Yamauchi 2009, p. 455 col. 1 in Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. John H Walton (Gen. Editor) Vol. 3. 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

¹⁸⁴ Clines 1984, p. 243

be worship and the whys this god was worshipped by the Israelites only. This whole reality marked a big difference between Israel and the other nations.

1.15 Verse 17, 18

¹⁷ I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing— desecrating the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Didn’t your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”

How much did he know the law? The discussion he raises with the nobles tells how much. At this point, Nehemiah as governor, shows that he knows the law much more in detail and that his knowledge is impeccably accurate. Not only does he bring out the law as according to Exodus 20:8-11 or Deuteronomy 5:12-15 but he goes further to attach details of Jeremiah 17:27, which warns of calamity upon Jerusalem for failure to heed the commandment.

Nehemiah calls for audience of the leaders. He sets the sin of Judah before them, reminding them of an important duty that has been neglected and which could be catastrophic for Jerusalem if is left unchecked. Israel was bound to keep the Sabbath holy, as it was commanded unto them by God but as it were, the Sabbath was superseded by trade in Jerusalem and Judah. Although the leaders themselves may not have been active participants in the trade on the Sabbath, but they are charged because they were the custodians of the law.

Nehemiah turned to the law-makers, to make them aware of the wrong that was going on – the profaning of the Sabbath. He talks to the nobles, the custodians of the law and overseers of responsible behaviour in the territory of Jerusalem. A legal charge is brought against these leaders. They have abrogated a law against the sabbath day, set holy, in remembrance of rest after creation and remembrance of Israel’s freedom from Egypt. Nehemiah’s charges: “What is this wicked thing you are doing – desecrating the Sabbath day?” From this charge, the leaders’ failure to properly use the law to stop the desecration of the Sabbath day meant their participation in the evil act, hence they are guilty as well. He reminded the leaders that through such a failure to observe a

day of rest instituted by God can bring calamity on Jerusalem and her inhabitants. That alone was a reasonable act that could lay down the foundation on God's anger upon Jerusalem and it was paramount for the Judean community to stop desecrating the Sabbath. By the end of that meeting, Nehemiah had brought out the restrictions and pitfalls facing Judeans in neglecting the Sabbath day.

The law applied to certain people but affected everyone within the boundary of the nation, therefore, all the inhabitants of Judah had to be banned from trading on the Sabbath. Again, it did not only affect the people but also the people were to respect the rest of animals used in the transportation of goods.¹⁸⁵

In verse 18, Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah, distances himself and his family from the sins that brought about exile upon Israel. He says, "Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city?" Note how he is denying the responsibility yet associating himself with the god of Israel – "Didn't your forefathers...our God..." He fears the consequences of the sins could be worse than exile.¹⁸⁶ In fact the exile was due to dishonouring the Sabbath.¹⁸⁷

1.16 Verses 19, 20

¹⁹ When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem.

Nehemiah practically enforces the law to stop the defilement of the Sabbath. Douglas Green observes that when Nehemiah shuts the gate to prevent the Sabbath breakers from getting inside,

¹⁸⁵ Clines 1984, p. 244

¹⁸⁶ Clines 1984, p. 244

¹⁸⁷ Holmgren 1987, p. 152

two important things are reflected. Inside the wall is what is holy and clean (Nehemiah 11:1-3; 12:30; 13:22) and outside the wall are the wicked (13:17) and profane (13:18). The wall was a barrier separating the community of Yahweh believing Israel from those who were considered less ideal.¹⁸⁸ He deploys his personal guards to enforce the law (Nehemiah 4:16),¹⁸⁹ and orders that the gates be closed until Sunday morning.¹⁹⁰ It is important to know exactly when the time marked for Sabbath as that is when the law of observance begins and ends. The beginning of Sabbath can in modern times be understood as Friday at sunset, in the evening and it ended the following day at darkness. The gates according to the order remained closed till Sunday morning.¹⁹¹ The gates were opened in the morning on Sunday, and not immediately at the end of Sabbath. Preceding the end of Sabbath was darkness, and the beginning of the first day, hence we suppose the gates reopened in the morning on Sunday.¹⁹² During the closure of the gates, probably small gates whilst still guarded, allowed the flow of people in and outside the city.¹⁹³

This action did not completely end the trade at once. The people had been used to breaking this law, such that even when it was re-enforced, there were still experiences of the propensity of trying to break it. The traders kept coming, hoping for the best. They brought with them their merchandise and lingered outside along the wall hoping they would either be allowed in or they would still trade there. Nehemiah observed that their close presence was still a catalyst to breaking the law. He charged and warned: “Why do you spend the night by the wall?” We can presume that peaceful efforts to avert the problem were being overlooked by the traders¹⁹⁴, hence Nehemiah further warns: “If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.” That destroyed their hopes and from then on, the traders feared and did not come again to trade on the Sabbath. He was ready to physically charge at them in order to rescue the nation from a possible calamity.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁸ Green 1993, p. 207

¹⁸⁹ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 360

¹⁹⁰ Clines 1984, p. 244

¹⁹¹ Clines 1984, p. 244

¹⁹² Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 360

¹⁹³ Clines 1984, p. 244

¹⁹⁴ According to details given in verse 20, this happened repeatedly.

¹⁹⁵ As long as the law was operational, breaking it was to be met with some potentially possible catastrophe for Israel.

²¹ *But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath.*

Having ensured that the place was a safe zone, he relieves the guards of this duty and deploys the Levites. By deploying the Levites, he devises a permanent solution. Blenkinsopp is of the view that several commentators see the deployment of the Levites as city gate-keepers to be historically unconvincing. They have attributed it to be the work of the Chronicler or an editor with similar views. The duty of the Levitical gate-keepers was to guard the entrance to the temple or the temple gates. The keeping of the sabbath as a sanctified and holy day was also labouring with purification rituals to be done (Ezra 6:20 and Nehemiah 12:30).¹⁹⁶ They made sure that no worshiper came close to the restricted areas of holiness. This became a religious duty for the Levites,¹⁹⁷ and got stationed at their posts of duty.

1.17 Verse 22

²² *Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.*

Finally, Nehemiah sees to it that by implementing the sabbath-commandment, the other religious rituals fall in place and the identity of Judah as a nation under Yahweh is also taking shape through exclusion of the non-exiles. Sabbath observance has been reinforced as an identity marker for the Judeans too and that shows their oneness as a group.

In my view, in a parallel account of trading on sabbath the people recognise they had been breaking the law and make a collective decision to address the problem:

¹⁹⁶ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 361. For an elaborative discussion on this consult, Clines, D.J.A, 1984 The New Century Bible Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

¹⁹⁷ Clines 1984, p. 245

“When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts” (Nehemiah 10:31).

While this is so, the people in this episode are not forced to observe the sabbath but they appreciate the law and become both law-abiding citizens and responsible worshipers of Yahweh by observing the law at the time. And as they observe it as an identity marker, they show oneness and solidarity.

This episode closes with a short prayer. Nehemiah, knowing the unpredictable acts of God, he calls for attention: “Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.” He is asking for God’s love towards him. He is asking for sustenance and mercy upon his life. Therefore, this is a prayer of long life for himself Nehemiah.¹⁹⁸

Conclusion

The chapter has discussed at length the Sabbath: More of importance was that it was instituted by Yahweh as a day of rest, and Israel was to rest as well on the Sabbath. When Israel was leaving the land of slavery, Egypt, they are reminded to remember the Sabbath because it was a day when they gained their freedom. It later returned in the decalogue as rule number four and Israel agreed to keep it holy. What was expected to be done or not to be done on the Sabbath has also been brought into perspective. Disregarding it among Israel led to severe consequences – death by stoning! Observing the Sabbath distinguished Israel from other nations but also publicly portrayed Israel’s relationship with Yahweh. Nehemiah stresses on not estranging this “Israel-Yaweh” relationship by profaning the Sabbath. The measures taken included closing the main gate into Jerusalem, stationing people to guard, and threatening those who did not want to stop trading on the Sabbath.

¹⁹⁸ Clines 1984, p. 245

CHAPTER 6

6. Episode 4: Language and mixed marriages – Nehemiah 13:23-28

Introduction

This chapter discusses several issues highlighted in Nehemiah 13:23-28. Among the several issues cited are: prohibited marriages, language, Nehemiah's power of anger, and his admonishment to Israel. The problems are related to one issue, that is, mixed marriages. This episode therefore, seeks to exclusively address the issue of mixed marriages among the Judean community in Jerusalem. To do this, scholarly material about mixed marriages as well as Hebrew Biblical texts will be used to gain insight on the subject. In that line the research also tracks the impact of mixed marriages and language on the Judean group identity.

This mixed marriage problem affected both the priests and the common men of Judah (Ezra 9:2; Nehemiah 13:23, 28). According to Exodus and Deuteronomistic literature, mixed marriages between Israel and non-Israel were banned – Exodus 34:15-17 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5 respectively. The prohibition was quoted either with a warning or a reason, and a solution. Exodus confirms that should no son of Israel marry from other ethnic groups, the abominable cultural practices will lead Israel astray from her deity. According to Deuteronomy, there is an acknowledgement that other ethnicities have power to influence Israel's faith negatively. Where interfaith was the issue, the solution was to defeat the god(s) of other nations.

In the biblical context, there appears to be interethnic, intercultural and interreligious forms of endogamy¹⁹⁹ and these are crucial to this discussion. The advice in Deuteronomy 7 has no distinct of the concept of "religion" in its prohibition. This is more of a moral issue. What most Hebrew texts mean on mixed marriages closely borders on "cultural" endogamy. However, groups such as cultural and religious cannot be avoided, hence the need to seek a further clarification.²⁰⁰ I agree

¹⁹⁹ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 6

²⁰⁰ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 7

with Smith-Christopher's view that Deuteronomy 7 displays a moral issue but I disagree that the same is not connected with concept of "religion."²⁰¹

The issue of intercultural marriages in Israel's history attracted much attention during the post-exilic era of the reconstruction of Israel's national identity. This prompted various research on the issue. Christian Frevel has edited a book entitled *Mixed Marriages: Inter-marriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period*.²⁰² At least twelve scholars participated on the subject, they advance the view that during the Judean Second Temple period, mixed marriage should be approached from a diachronic angle. This means that this happening underwent different changes in history from the patriarchal period to the Hellenistic period. Frevel and Conczorowski in their essay they came up with three stages of mixed marriage: (a) patriarchal – morality is singled-out as the main issue for marrying foreigners, (b) religious apostasy – marriage with other ethnicities would bring about the worship of other gods other than what Israel was historically expected to do – to worship Yahweh alone and (c) cultic – in this Second Temple era, the priesthood who were the spiritual guidance of Judah, needed protection. The same case applied for the temple.²⁰³

At the centre of this transition of embracing a new identity, which was restricted to the descendants of the exiled tribes of the southern kingdom and the tribe of Levi, Ezra and Nehemiah were the main leaders. Ezra with the authority of the Persian king left Babylon mandated to develop a religious and legal system for the exiles who returned to Yehud (also referred to as "the province Beyond the River" (Ezra 7:11-26)).²⁰⁴ Ezra led the group, but the regime also gave the Jewish priests and scribes the power to develop a legal system to govern the community living in Yehud.²⁰⁵ However, when it comes to the time of Nehemiah rule, it appears he was acting alone while Ezra in most cases he was acting with those in authority – priests and community leaders.

²⁰¹ See Deuteronomy 7:3-4 "Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD'S anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you."

²⁰² Frevel and Conczorowski 2011, p. 15-16

²⁰³ Frevel and Conczorowski 2011, p. 15-16

²⁰⁴ Winslow 2018, p. 11. This is unpublished work entitled, Ezra's "Holy Seed": Marriage and Othering in the Bible.

²⁰⁵ Winslow 2018, p. 11.

Soon the legal system was being tested with the contentious issue of mixed marriages. To analyse this issue of mixed marriages for a better understanding, I will to sociological and anthropological methods and later return to interpretation of the mixed marriages.

Sociological Perspectives on Mixed Marriages

Several Sociological perspectives will be discussed including romantic and inheritance. Sociological perspectives can prove to be helpful in further understanding the marriage issue cited in Ezra-Nehemiah. I have found that although not every sociological perspective on marriage can aid the understanding, I have carefully searched for perspectives that are in line with the issue in question.

From the sociological perspective, Smith-Christopher first argues that:

“[W]e need to ask if there is a general biblical attitude toward ‘mixed marriage’. Interestingly enough, there does appear to be a ‘romantic streak’ running through ancient Hebrew narrative on this issue, an attitude that certainly appears to change in the post-exilic context, at least for more conservative leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah.”²⁰⁶

In trying to arrive at informed conclusions for the study, different scholars have applied various theories to these texts. For instance, Merton’s hypergamy theory²⁰⁷ on endogamy, marrying within one’s group is one of the many theories used. His work did not fall short of criticism. It was deemed to have outdated assumptions which claimed that men are by nature more mobile than women. He also overlooked variables like education and the size of the group in his study. This

²⁰⁶ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 253

²⁰⁷ Southwood 2011, p.3

model generates the problems applied to Ezra onto Nehemiah if applied.²⁰⁸ Other problems that interfere the linking together of the two accounts are context, land and class.²⁰⁹ There is a shift on how we are now made to perceive who the owners of the land were during this immediate post-exilic era. For the covenant in Genesis did not specify the current claims of Ezra-Nehemiah. Are the exiles trying to vehemently protect the land from foreigners who may rightly inherit it in future? The fears could be founded in Tamara C. Eskenazi's views that:

“...inheritance may have been a major concern in the post-exilic community since Jewish women could inherit land, as shown in the Elephantine Papyri.”²¹⁰

Due to Ezra's view of the whole mixed marriage issue, it is important to look at how Ezra may have viewed the term endogamy. To him, 'endogamy' meant marrying within a religious and ethnically defined group.²¹¹ And here, (Ezra 9:4) this group has a narrow definition: *“one who has experienced exile in Babylon (Hebrew: “sons of the exile”) and all those who have not are Others.”*²¹² As such, those who were directly involved in the issue may not have viewed these marriages as 'mixed marriage' as the leaders of the time did.²¹³ Such runs throughout Nehemiah's episodes. Are the people clear about the law or not? From their activities described by the author there is a possibility of ignorance, or failure to adhere to the law. For Ezra was a scribe and a highly skilled teacher of the Law of Moses.²¹⁴ Therefore, part of his duties was to transfer that knowledge onto the Judean community, both formally and informally.

Frevel is of the view that:

“First, the word pair “endogamy” and “exogamy” has to be mentioned. In Biblical studies, the term endogamy is often used either in a narrow sense, denoting marital relations within kinship or extended families (e.g., the family of Jacob), or in a comprehensive way, comprising marriages within a certain social group (e.g., the

²⁰⁸ Southwood 2011, p. 3

²⁰⁹ Southwood 2011, p. 3 And 4

²¹⁰ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 244 And 245

²¹¹ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 247

²¹² Winslow 2018, p. 6. This is unpublished work entitled, Ezra's "Holy Seed": Marriage and Othering in the Bible.

²¹³ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 247

²¹⁴ See Ezra 7:6

Israelites). Exogamy forms the corresponding counterpart in both cases. In sociological understanding, both terms are also quite unspecific.”²¹⁵

Frevel provides detailed information on how the “mixed marriages” are viewed in the Hebrew Bible. Frevel says anthropologists view endogamy from the following different perspectives:

- (a) kin group endogamy – marriage within a specific family range;
- (b) alliance endogamy – which is roughly marriage within a defined group, such as class or religious; and
- (c) local endogamy – marriage within a certain geographical boundary, such as town or village endogamy.

However, within the context of class endogamy/exogamy, which is marriage within or outside one’s social strata, pair is paramount for sociological research. There is marriage of spouses who are of equal social status, and that is isogamy while the marriages of spouses that have unbalanced social status is anisogamy. Thus, isogamy is paired with anisogamy.²¹⁶

Anisogamy is further divided into two terms. “Hypergamy,” – when a woman marries a man belonging to an upper class than hers while “hypogamy” is when a woman of a higher class marries a man from a lower class.²¹⁷ Exponents of the ‘hypergamy’ theory strongly advance the view that successful males from a low status groups will try by all means to marry females of a higher status.²¹⁸

Having discusses some of the sociological and anthropological perspectives on mixed marriages, I return to the text of Ezra-Nehemiah on the same issue.

²¹⁵ Frevel 2011, p. 4

²¹⁶ Frevel 2011, p. 5 And 6

²¹⁷ Frevel 2011, p. 6

²¹⁸ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 249

In comparison, in Numbers 25 mixed marriage results in death as a punishment and enmity is put between Israel and the Midianites. It leads Israel into promiscuous sexual activities and idolatry. In Deuteronomy 7:3-4, mixed marriage is prohibited because it would lead to veneration of gods other than Yahweh among Israel while in Ezra 9:2, it is banned because it would lead to the contamination of the “holy race” or “holy seed.”²¹⁹ A phrase, “holy seed” is used here but Deuteronomy used the phrase “holy people.”²²⁰ It is not certain if this change is due to context, but the bottom line remains that Israel, thus, the former exiles are a holy people therefore, should not intermarry. Before Nehemiah’s account of mixed marriage, Ezra had dealt with it (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9-10).

From the list of ethnicities mentioned in Ezra 9:2, it is the last four nationalities who are paramount at that time and their existence interferes with the “true” genealogy of some of the Jews. A commitment not to interfere with the genealogy was made and Nehemiah as governor, was one of the people who put a seal on the document (Nehemiah 9:38 – 10:1). In Chapter 10:30, the people made a specific commitment, that is, not to intermarry.

However, Nehemiah 13, details a massive scale marital separation, with a view to solidifying ethnicity. For separation from anything confronting or interpreted as interfering with true Israel religious and political ideologies was inevitable at this point. Hence to re-establish her identity, Israel through these ages censored herself thoroughly in her own national interest as a nation in the making.

The mixed marriage issue kept on resurfacing in the Hebrew Bible. That raises an idea that the issue of mixed marital unions was a complicated one. Despite a ban in use, Israel, still willingly got into marital unions with other distinct ethnicities as can be seen in verse 23:

1.18 Verse 23

²¹⁹ Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, & Petersen 1999, p. 435

²²⁰ Deuteronomy 7:1-6 introduces a short list similar to that of Ezra 9:1-2 warning about intermarriages.

Some of the people belonging to the Judean community plunged themselves into a relationship trouble with Yahweh and law on one hand and with the leadership on the other. The problem hinged on marrying foreign wives. Ezra met with the leadership. A proposal from Shecaniah son of Jehiel²²¹ was advanced and adopted.²²² Shecaniah suggested national confession and a vow be made before God against mixed marriages. He promised support for the action against the mixed marriages evil.²²³ Finally, a radical remedial picked by Ezra was instant divorce. They sent them away together with their children or face undisclosed severe penalties (Ezra 10.30).²²⁴ The women became widows and the children, orphans, by imposed choice. The action may appear draconian, but it had the participation of the masses, the people agreed to that.²²⁵ However, as research reveals, Nehemiah picked another course to stop the problem as detailed in verse 25.

According to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, certificates of divorce were to be presented to them so that they are cleared and made free to remarry if they so wished to.

“Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab” (Nehemiah 13:23).

The mentioning of the Ashdod brings back Nehemiah’s memories and experiences of their rivalry towards him. For Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod all connived to bring down Nehemiah’s work. That attempt also had a bearing on Nehemiah’s authority – to bring public disrepute and to try to make the people in Jerusalem ungovernable for him by stirring

²²¹ See Ezra 10:2, 21. If this is the same Jehiel who is listed among the people who had married foreign wives then Shecaniah is a product of this mixed marriage problem. Therefore, the proposal raised by him in the leadership group is somehow worthy pondering as this was going to affect himself and the parents.

²²² Shepherd & Wright 2018, p. 148

²²³ Ezra 10:2-4 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. ³ Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. ⁴ Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.”

²²⁴ Shepherd & Wright 2018, p. 148

²²⁵ See Ezra 10:12-17

up trouble.²²⁶ The religious practices of these ethnicities was abominable to Yahweh and therefore were not in conformity with Israel's prescribed religious practices. These prohibited nations had their own gods which Yahweh the god of Israel downgrade to as false gods, and these nations too religiously led idolatrous lifestyle.

How could the exiles forget of the attitude of the Ashdod men within a short time that they made unions with women from Ashdod? Their relationships with the Judeans is up-to no good.

The torah formally recognized marriages that were in conformity with the stipulated laws about marriage. However, in human history laws or rules, no matter their final stringent results, people still break them and, in some cases, live with the consequences of breaking the laws. Before banning marriages with foreigners, the book of Moses in Leviticus 18 gave a list of forbidden sexual relations which were either a threat to existing relationships or had a risky potential of turning into a marriage.²²⁷

In this context, I argue that God did not approve of Judah men to marry foreign women. This disapproval is also re-echoed by prophet Malachi, who says, "Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god" – Malachi 2:11. The prophet bemoans and warns of Judah's instability because the promises they made even during the time of Ezra had been broken. Hensel asserts that marriage with other ethnic groups was nothing but a conspiracy against precepts of Yahweh (Nehemiah 13:27)²²⁸ who had covenanted with Israel. In Deuteronomy Israel is called as a holy people to the LORD their God (Deuteronomy 7:6; 4:20; 14:2) and would not change the promises made to Israel (Deuteronomy 4:31; 26:18) but Israel needed to once they realized they were in the wrong. Nehemiah tried to make Israel live up to the granted opportunity

²²⁶ See Nehemiah 4:1-8. The builders for some time were ridiculed by the various groups of people that lived in and around Jerusalem.

²²⁷ See more on Leviticus 18 and 19 dealing with social and moral laws

²²⁸ Hensel 2018, p. 145

of having a faithful relationship with God because God had initiated that relationship which Israel agreed to keep as holy. Nehemiah's now practical actions are fulfilling the then theological agreement Israel signed with God. In theological aspects, Israel, must fulfil what as a nation, it was already what is was – thus, a holy people of God.

Israel, as a nation, had its own laws regarding marriage, different from other nations just like as it is today. At the time in question, Nehemiah revisited and reinforced the law. Indeed, it was possible that some of the mixed marriages were legally accepted at some level of leadership but did not conform to the law cited in the Book of Moses, hence, were technically outlawed, and therefore, not recognised in a society strictly governed by the torah. Israel was not to modify the existing laws or to set other laws because as a nation, they were defined by the known torah law of that time and had to abide by that to make a difference and to remain in union with their god.

Those that negatively affected Israel were named as women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. Now, Israel by law was forbidden to marry from outside their nation – shortly before entering the land of Canaan, Deuteronomy 7:3 warns the Israelites. When they were in the land it was re-echoed in Joshua 23:12-13. Finally, an example for breaking that law follows in 1 Kings 11:1-2. Some scholars agree that the main issue with foreign women in Nehemiah 13 has to do with threats to the cult.²²⁹ In this regard, Israel was not affected by mixed marriages as understood in biological sense but on religious sense.²³⁰ Commenting on the same view, Eskenazi and Judd say that the conflict was on religious grounds rather than on peoplehood.²³¹

David Janzen asserts that, the presence of foreign women among the Jehudites was a threat to the worship of Yahweh because of widespread apostasy and were believed to practice syncretism.²³² Therefore, tolerance to interfaith practices would have corrupted, and drifted Israel away from being called “holy.” However, as a nation striving to attain national identity, separation was practically and highly unavoidable.

²²⁹ Paulo 2014, p. 53

²³⁰ Clauss 2011, p. 129

²³¹ Sitali 2014, p. 71

²³² Janzen 2002, p. 11

Based on that it, the conclusion would that due to mixed marriages with foreign women who were believed to practiced interfaith religion, Israel eventually would have been converted to an interfaith society. Therefore, the dissolution of those marriages through the law in the Book of Moses became a possible solution to the problem. This research highly presumes that the law used was based on the meaning and interpretation of the law in Deuteronomy 7.

While for Ezra the officials come to him to complain about these marriages and then he acts conversely, for Nehemiah, sees the problem himself (verse 23) and treat that with exigency to have the issue resolved. He feels the implication of these marriages (verse 24) and is more concerned with the negative outcome of these mixed marriages than the social and family unity. Language degeneration was the main concern. Human relationships were not much at risk with these marriages, but the Hebrew language was deeply affected, and it perturbed him because:

1.19 Verse 24

Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah – (Nehemiah 13:24).

Prior to this verse, Nehemiah mentions of women from, *Ashdod, Ammon and Moab*. The proceeding verse acknowledges that the children spoke *Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples*.²³³ This gives an impression that the Jewish community had a diversity of languages in daily use. These other proliferating languages vied with Hebrew to be recognised as the language of the reforming community. The children were not competent polyglots. A further jeopardy to the Hebrew language was that it was not an official language. Esko Siljanen, a biblical scholar, asserts that Aramaic was the official language used in Persia and in her colonies.²³⁴

To understand the situation further, it was important that Hebrew was necessary for categorising someone as a Judean; therefore, failure to express it meant having a questionable identity. The

²³³ Nehemiah 13:24

²³⁴ Siljanen 2017, p. 39

only way for them to appreciate the OT teachings was for them to learn and use the Hebrew language.

Nehemiah's focus strictly shifted to language for this ethnic group. Nehemiah does this because every language is native to some people and that for every human being the first language is vital of their identity.²³⁵ He needed to maintain the Hebrew which was crucial to the group's identity. The language had to be protected. There is close connection between ethnicity and language.²³⁶ Southwood further goes on to argue that:

“...language is ‘both increased and exploited’ when ethnicity rises to a level of public consciousness; thus it ‘easily becomes “more than” a means of communication...indeed, it becomes a prime ethnic value in and of itself.’”²³⁷

According to verse 23 of this account, language is inseparable from ethnicity. In this account, Nehemiah is very concerned in preserving Hebrew as the language of the nation. Southwood asserts that political identities are strongly linked with ethnicity and that the two, political identity and ethnicity and not always separable. However, mostly the language will survive especially when ethnicity is supported through institutions.²³⁸ This means that there should be deliberate structured systems of dissemination. Systems which can sustain as well as facilitate the passing on of the language from one generation to the other without the language being lost in the process.

There is always an undeniable connection between language and ethnicity as languages at most times is an important feature for national identity. It is also considered at the key symbol of an ethnic boundary.²³⁹

The primordial theory attributes ethnicity ties to language, race, religion, territory, blood and custom and as basic.²⁴⁰ Therefore, language becomes extremely important for the in-group as part of its border as well as an identity.

²³⁵ Janson 2012, p. 56

²³⁶ Southwood 2011, p. 8

²³⁷ Southwood 2011, p. 8

²³⁸ Southwood 2011, p. 9

²³⁹ Southwood 2011, p. 10

²⁴⁰ Southwood 2011, p. 6

Hebrew was the language of the Torah, and the writer refers to it as “the language of Judah.” The author of Nehemiah does this to consolidate an ethnicity point of view. Therefore, failure to formally communicate in Hebrew exposed three dangerous things resulting from mixed marriages: **(a)** the number of those who could not articulate in Hebrew; **(b)** a potential threat to the continuation of the Hebrew religious institution, and; **(c)** the possible demise of Hebrew language. These three results had progressive impact on Judah. The third one would have seen the possible collapse of the cult. Hebrew nearly became a minority language in its own historic homeland and among its own people especially the young.

Speaking the mother’s tongue was not a surprise because of a mother’s influence in the formative years. Csilla asserts that women had much influence on their children’s religious education.²⁴¹ However, it is unknown as to why the other half of the children did not follow suit.²⁴² It is important to see here that language has always been a vital part of national identity,²⁴³ and it is not an ethnic identity but a dimension of one’s identity.²⁴⁴ This distinction, helped Nehemiah to quickly identify the children who were not able to speak the Hebrew language. At this point in time, this was central for the Judean community at a time of languages vying for official recognition (2 Kings 18:26, 28).

Family responsibility had failed to meet the expected standards set. The family was a fundamental educational centre and parents were expected to teach their own children (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).²⁴⁵ Zhao Juntao asserts that children first received their education from home through their parents. First, memorisation. Then they learned how to pray, to sing psalm, religious knowledge and moral principles.²⁴⁶ Schoeman, a scholar based in South Africa notes that, due to mixed marriages, and heathen practices, it was not possible to preserve the national culture and the worship of

²⁴¹ Csilla 2009, p. 53

²⁴² Blenkinsopp 1989, p. 363

²⁴³ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 363

²⁴⁴ Becking 2011, p. 103

²⁴⁵ Schoeman 1997, p. 412. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 clearly mandates parents to teach their children the ways of the LORD. “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

²⁴⁶ Zhao 2015, p.826 Col. 1

Yahweh.²⁴⁷ Therefore, it was not possible for these parents to teach their children according to expected Israel's standards.

The children's lack of basic skills in Hebrew knowledge interfered with both education and religion. It was Israel's culture that children learn through reading of the torah also in synagogues. Nehemiah's leadership within the temple, gave him good insight about these children's basic language skills prior to the statement: "...and did not know how to speak the language of Judah."²⁴⁸

The children spoke the language of their mothers who were either Ashdod, Ammonites or Moabites or spoke a language of the other peoples, who are not mentioned in the text. Ashdod was one of the five Philistine cities.²⁴⁹ The verse poses technical complication than clarity resulting from translation.²⁵⁰

Those who experienced Babylon exile were in a land that was considered to be with advanced culture and education system. Living in such an environment, the Hebrews came to know and understand the importance of education and literature.²⁵¹ Nehemiah could be one of those who understood this because his actions led to the survival of a people.²⁵²

1.20 Verse 25

²⁵ *I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.*

²⁴⁷ Schoeman 1997, p. 416

²⁴⁸ See Nehemiah 13:24

²⁴⁹ Pritchard 1969, p. 286; 1 Samuel 6:17;

²⁵⁰ Southwood 2011, p. 1

²⁵¹ Schoeman 1997, p. 412

²⁵² Blenkinsopp 1989, p. 363

To begin this topical issue, let me start by critically analysing the decisions or the outcomes of these two parallel accounts in Ezra and Nehemiah the issue of mixed marriages. I will further compare the differences and similarities of Ezra 9 – 10 and Nehemiah 13 as both account deal with this contentious issue.

Comparison of the assembly decisions: Ezra 10:11-17 and Nehemiah 13:23, 25-28

Between the two texts cited above, there is a considerable difference in which the crowd reacted to the reforms that were being propagated and effected on the Judean community. The bone of contention in both cases is the same, mixed marriages. There is a more participatory as well as a more informative reaction from the people in the Ezra account while for Nehemiah, it is about his reactions towards the community. When Ezra and the leaders gave a two-task proposal to: (a) the separate from the other people; and (b) have mixed marriage dismissed, the assembly unanimously reacted in affirmative: “You are right! We must do as you say” – Ezra 10:12.

Ray Lubeck notes that soon after they heard the proposal, the people agreed that the separation was a good idea, they quickly assessed the situation and resolved that they couldn't do it right then and there because: (1) they were too crowded; (2) it was raining out there; (3) it couldn't be done in just a day or two; (4) it should be done at a later time in the individual villages, and (5) some opposed the idea anyway (10:12-15). So, Ezra organized the implementation of the separation (10:16-17), and “they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women” (10:17). The end of Ezra — it cannot be regarded as a “conclusion”— contains simply a list of the offenders with the summation that “all these had married foreign women, and some of them had children by these wives” (10:18-44).²⁵³ What happens next is what every interested critical reader wants to know. This is where Nehemiah comes in with the same problem – mixed marriages. However, Nehemiah was not lackadaisical on the matter. Nehemiah took a string of actions towards those who were found wanting. Nehemiah's actions are further discussed in detail in this chapter – read on.²⁵⁴

²⁵³ Lubeck 2011, p. 5

²⁵⁴ I have laboured to discuss at length at least five reactions that Nehemiah over unspecified period of time did to the people who were found to have married foreign wives.

Nehemiah having observed the mixed marriages in Judah, acts in a number of ways that demand to be looked at critically. Although both Ezra and Nehemiah were at the top of their political hierarchical authority in Judah, they reacted differently to this mixed marriage problem. Both received credentials from the Persian king, Artaxerxes, entrusting them with authority and responsibility of Judah. Ezra is thought to have acted far above his given authority.²⁵⁵ Ezra enlightened them as to what the law says about mixed marriage and gave possible solutions. Nehemiah, on the contrary, deals with a problem – of mixed marriages – which was addressed. He pours out his emotions towards the problem. He argued with them so that they may realise, acknowledge, accept their wrong and embrace the precepts of a true Israel and the Judean community, which they had departed from. It had a recent past reference. A problem which according to Nehemiah should be less but it appeared, it was increasing and from the reactions, he appeared to be deeply disappointed with mixed marriages issue.

In both cases, mixed marriages are at stake in the Israel community. However, details of the decision and the outcome from Ezra's and Nehemiah accounts, thus, Ezra 10:1–44 and Nehemiah 13:23–31, are obviously different. Scholars have slightly different views: Pieter M Venter concludes that in both cases of Ezra and Nehemiah, the mixed marriages were dissolved Israelite men were married to 'foreign women' from the neighbouring people²⁵⁶ while Shepherd and Wright agree with the results of Ezra's account but have a different view on Nehemiah's asserting that he did not try to force people to divorce.²⁵⁷

After completely convincing them that they were not to have married "foreign" wives and that from then onwards should consider their marriages as unlawful or as no more. The latter consideration meant that they and should regard themselves as "single", both in private and public life. Whichever decision each affected individual took, Nehemiah then pronounced curses on all of them. As they were already guilty at this point, Nehemiah sought for an appropriate punishment and acted as mandated by the law Deuteronomic law:

²⁵⁵ Blenkinsopp 1989, p. 179

²⁵⁶ Venter 2018, p. 1

²⁵⁷ Shepherd and Wright 2018, p. 148

“If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves, but he must not give him more than forty lashes. If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes” – Deuteronomy 25:2-3.

Again, Nehemiah chose to act differently. He took a more disciplinarian measure. It seems the notorious ones were singled out beaten. This thesis concludes that since this was more of a court hearing, it was a public event and Nehemiah had his own officers as well who could have taken part in disciplining those found wrong. Next, their hairs were plucked. It is not certain if this was an identity mark at that time of who they had turned out to be, or it was just an act to publicly humiliate them?

In that state of humiliation, Nehemiah made the men to make an oath whose words are: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.” Nehemiah continued, “I made them...” Exactly who is he referring to as “them”? It is possible that he made all the Judahites to make the promise. Another school of thought would be that he meant those who had separated from their “foreign” wives. If they made individual pronouncement of the oath, then probably it was taking in the form of: “*I, (name) will not give my daughters in marriage to their sons, nor am I to take their daughters in marriage for my sons or for myself.*”

“But why should they swear that they themselves will not marry foreign women, when they have already done so? **for yourselves** is not in Deuteronomic law, and is in fact omitted here by the Septuagint, probably because of this very difficulty interpretation. It is possible that such an oath demands the divorce of wives married contrary to the law, and that Nehemiah’s attitude to mixed marriages was not so very different from Ezra’s.”²⁵⁸

1.21 Verse 26

²⁵⁸ Clines 1984, p. 247

²⁶ *Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women.*

In admonishing them further, Nehemiah introduces a moral example by bringing in King Solomon, greatly loved and ordered to be named as *Jedidiah—Beloved of the Lord*.²⁵⁹ God blessed him, with surpassingly wisdom but was still lead astray by foreign women. He could not worship Yahweh *alone* whole heartedly.²⁶⁰ Was the Jewish man with questionable faith still going to triumph over the faith of foreign women?²⁶¹ No! It was sealed Solomon remained and remains as the wisest person to have ever lived.²⁶² Therefore, Nehemiah had to prevent these unions as early as possible. Evidence showed that even priests had been involved in such mixed marriages with out-group women. The mixed marriages cemented Nehemiah's action of seeking nothing but to take a stern public action and demanded that all those involved in foreign marriages separate from their wives as the best solution. Hensel is of the idea that the reference to Solomon on mixed marriages brings into the narrative the subject of "sin" being fulfilled through mixed marriages with out-groups.²⁶³ However, I would like to add that the mere cogitation to mix with "foreign women", was sin in the making. The mingling with "foreign women", let alone getting them for a wife was sin. The latter became a sin publicly acknowledged and needed a public confession. Shepherd and Wright, commentary authors, assert that for issues relating to genealogy, some priests were deemed defiled as a result, they needed cleansing (Ezra 7:64; Nehemiah 13:30).²⁶⁴

On this issue of mixed marriages, Nehemiah cited the example of King Solomon. By citing that Nehemiah showed his sound knowledge of the early history of Israel. He attributed mixed marriages to sin, and he denounces the attitude of the Jews.²⁶⁵ To the contrary, Lisbeth Fried, a scholar and publisher, disagrees on the knowledge of Nehemiah. Fried says that Nehemiah knew

²⁵⁹ 2 Samuel 12:24-25

²⁶⁰ See 1 Kings 11:6 (So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done)

²⁶¹ Clines 1984, p. 248. See also Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 365

²⁶² See the word of 1 Kings 3:12, "I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."

²⁶³ Hensel 2018, p. 145

²⁶⁴ Shepherd and Wright 2018, p. 106

²⁶⁵ Fensham 1982, p. 267

about Solomon who he refers to but did not know about Moses.²⁶⁶ In my view, Fried's judgement that Nehemiah knew about Solomon and not Moses is contentious and therefore unsatisfactory. One requires getting into the background of Nehemiah's thoroughly. Nehemiah worked closely with Ezra, the priest and scribe, and Nehemiah was versed in the public instruction of the law (Nehemiah 8:1, 9; 9:6).

However, according to Deuteronomic law, the punishment for turning Israel away from the LORD was a death penalty by stoning.²⁶⁷ In this context, though possibilities were there that Israel could be enticed into worshipping other gods, Nehemiah chose to take a lighter way of not claiming lives but ending the marriages and expelling one person from Jerusalem.

1.22 Verse 27

²⁷ Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?"

From the sociological perspective, Smith-Christopher notes that the Persian authorities did support mass mixed marriages at a higher level of leadership. However, it is not certain if the Judean community was also encouraged in the same vein. Nonetheless, if they were encouraged, then this is a complication of the mixed marriages episode. Therefore, it certainly meant that the action taken by Nehemiah to dissolve the existing marriages was a crush of this Persian political ideology.²⁶⁸ Nehemiah did not only end such existing marriages, but discouraged prospective relations leading to such marriages and banned any such kind of marriages – (verse 27). Such type of exogamous marriages was viewed as wickedness. However, the Persian political authorities might have considered such as a rebellious act.

²⁶⁶ Fried 2014, p. 40. The verses referred to being Nehemiah 13:8, 11, 17, 25, and 26. Further disagreements advance by Fried are: Lisbeth Fried says, some scholars are of the view that Nehemiah did not know a Torah or a law code because he did not refer to it when he made the following actions: removed Tobiah from the temple space; rebuked the temple officials; rebuked the officials for desecrating the Sabbath by allowing trade to go on; and, contending with Judean nobles for having mixed marriages. He knew about Solomon who he refers to but did not know about Moses.²⁶⁶ Fried's observations that Nehemiah did not refer to the law may be accepted with explanations.

²⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 13:6-11

²⁶⁸ Smith-Christopher 1994, P. 264

Becking reveals the following differences between the two leaders:

EZRA

1. Mourning pulls his hair and beards (Ezra 9:3)
2. Prays.
3. Uses inclusive language, “we”. He accepts that together with the others in the group they are sinners.
4. Together with the leaders of the community they find possible solutions to the problem: foreign women are sent off; marriages end.

NEHEMIAH

1. Nehemiah pulls the hair of those accused of indulging in wrong doing.
2. Preaches a short sermon.
3. He is aloof and rebuking the others.
4. He only says, “I cleansed them from everything foreign.” Without gives the leader possible measures taken upto the cleansing process.²⁶⁹

1.23 Verse 28

²⁸ One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me.

Priests were mandated to only marry a virgin from among his own people.²⁷⁰ Anyone within the priestly lineage could rise to the ascribed status of high priest. Therefore, the situation in verse 28, was grossly dangerous.²⁷¹ At this time, Nehemiah demanded total obedience to his authority.

²⁶⁹ Becking 2011, p. 104

²⁷⁰ See Leviticus 21:14

²⁷¹ Fensham 1982, p. 267

The reality in this context is that any insubordination is met with its own unique reaction – plucking of hair and beards, stern warning, and to some extremes, expulsion from the community. One of the grandsons of Eliashib the high priest, and who was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite was unceremoniously expelled from the community. Such punitive measures also resulted in an increasing number of opponents to his rule. His opponents had their “scriptural” debates which for some reasons have not been kept. There is a conflict of interpretations, applying authoritative text in a manner that is presumably capable of eliminating the current problem.²⁷² According to Isaiah 56:1-8 and Ruth, at that time, the interpretation of texts was an important factor in the struggle for Judah’s self-definition.²⁷³

This text reveals that its context, the background, the actors involved in it, and its main objective is different from and Hebrew texts on mixed marriages and demands to be handled uniquely.

“Although throughout most of the Jewish Scriptures, marriage was an acceptable way for women to enter Israel/Judah, in this text, marriage did not enfold a woman into the community. Instead the marriages “polluted” the “holy seed” identified with previously exiled male Jews.”²⁷⁴

With that confirmation that in this context of Nehemiah, mixed marriages still remained an issue to be resolved. As for Nehemiah, group identity raises concerns for boundary protection but also requires the law to be effected and be effective. The marriages in this question, like any other mixed marriages involving priests in EN had infringed the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. As for the priests who had been involved into mixed marriages, their acts saved as examples for other common Israelites to do the same. They knew the law but failed to enforce it. Those involved in mixed marriages could not speak against the act.

²⁷² Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 364

²⁷³ Blenkinsopp 1988, p. 364

²⁷⁴ Winslow 2018, p. 16. This is unpublished work entitled, Ezra’s “Holy Seed”: Marriage and Othering in the Bible.

Though Nehemiah may be thought of to be causing friction with the religious authorities, one has to look to the mandate Ezra was given by the Persian king. That has already been established in this discussion; therefore, Nehemiah's incursions into cultic and religious matters should not be understood as interference but as his authority given to him by the king to oversee Judea as a province.²⁷⁵

Therefore, Nehemiah prays for mercy before God "Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites." God should remember and act against those that abrogated his covenant, thus, the priests and the Levites who were involved in either marrying foreign wives or blessing these mixed marriages, though the latter is not explicitly said. The covenant had not been broken but defiled, profaned, meaning the relationship which was established between the priesthood lineage and Yahweh had been negatively affected. The possible remedy was for the priests and the Levites to be purified of everything that was foreign.

I will now conclude the discussion by turning to differences and similarities between the account in Ezra and the one in Nehemiah.

Differences and Similarities: Ezra 9 – 10 and Nehemiah 13

There are number of similarities and differences highlighted in these two accounts of mixed marriages. One intriguing and interesting aspect noted is that some of the major differences are resulting from some similarities.

Southwood warns that although Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13 deal with the problem of mixed marriages, there are issues of trying to pick out similarities from these two accounts.²⁷⁶ Smith-Christopher asserts that if one is to understand the mixed marriage problem in the Persian era raised in Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13 one has to have a vivid understanding of the differences of these two accounts. Though the problem is similar, there are different points of emphasis running

²⁷⁵ Clines 1984, p. 21

²⁷⁶ Southwood 2011, p. 3

in the stories.²⁷⁷ Indeed Southwood and Smith-Christopher's observations are vital and before conclusions are made on this mixed marriage issue will try to scrutinise the differences and similarities raised in the two periscopes. First importantly, both Ezra and Nehemiah acknowledge and bring to light the issue of mixed marriages among the Judean community. Both leaders supported radical changes to solve the problem as it rose among the Judeans. Through these radical changes, family units remained most affected with the changes brought forward and implemented.

The people who went to report the issue to Ezra where themselves blameless and had kept the law in their lineage. For that, they had every right to raise the issue to Ezra. As for Nehemiah, the problem comes from his own findings which were related to mixed marriage issue.

The first point of similarity is that both Ezra and Nehemiah are protesting against mixed marriages. The resulting difference being that Ezra's protest is between Jews who had been in exile and Jews who had not been in exile, and Nehemiah is protesting against Jews who had married non-Jews.²⁷⁸ From Ezra's protest, it is clear that although the Jews were regarded as one ethnic group from one descendant, yes, but history had changed the course of the view. They had same descendant, but the exile became a rigid separating factor between them and so two groups emerged. With Nehemiah, the protest is against Jews who had married non-Jews, and this is evident as he names some of the groups. With regard to Southwood's view (Ezra's protest is between Jews who had been in exile and Jews who had not been in exile), one needs to analyse that view against the list given in Ezra 9:2.

The second similarity is that both narratives are using Deuteronomy 7 as a caution for mixed marriages. The split being that Ezra's warning is tightly connected with Deuteronomy 23²⁷⁹ while Nehemiah's warning is connected to Solomon's failure due to foreign wives.²⁸⁰ However, on Nehemiah's choice of point of reference, King Solomon, other scholars are quick to add a political dimension to that example. From Nehemiah's side there is a clear impression that foreign

²⁷⁷ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 253

²⁷⁸ Southwood 2011, p. 4

²⁷⁹ Southwood 2011, p. 4

²⁸⁰ 1 Kings 11:1-10

marriages are a political problem squarely on the hands of Jewish nobles and civic government leaders.²⁸¹

The third similarity is that both Ezra and Nehemiah give a short list of the of foreign women involved in the mixed marriage issue. The difference being that in Ezra the list is composed of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. Some of the groups mentioned are believed to have been extinct by this time. As for Nehemiah the short list is drawn against women from Ashdodites, Ammonites and Moabites²⁸² who at this period of time they are in existence (Nehemiah 13:23)²⁸³ and participating in the community most of activities of the Judeans.

Note that the three passages which warn against marrying foreign women, the nationalities are specified: in 1 Kings 1:1-22 – Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. In Ezra 9:2 – Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites, and Nehemiah 13:23 mentions of women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab

The shape of group identity in Nehemiah takes form by not considering all of ‘mixed descent’ or ‘foreign descent’. This act compacts and strengthens the formation of the boundary of this group in a complicated way. In nature, it is exclusive in that, clearly foreign women cannot be part of the group, their blood children too. This could have affected the foreign women and children or could have affected the whole family especially of the young people who were raised in such “mixed marriage” families. And this is where the main ‘web’ of boundary for this ethnic group is – the definition. One falls out because they are not of Israel descent, or either because they are of Israel descent but have not been in exile in Babylon. The latter is crucial and possibly threatens the unity and existence of the group of the exiles in Jerusalem and Judea. For instance, one cross-cutting issue that we would not neatly knit in the definition is people like Hanani, the brother to Nehemiah. He and the others who went up to Susa to meet Nehemiah. Had they been in exile

²⁸¹ Smith-Christopher 1994, p. 259

²⁸² Southwood 2011, p. 5

²⁸³ See note 15, a helpful and remarkable point from Southwood article: ‘And They Could Not Understand Jewish Speech’: Language, Ethnicity, and Nehemiah’s Intermarriage Crisis, in *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol. 62, Pt 1, April 2011.

before? Nehemiah uses words like the “Jewish remnant” that “survived the exile.” In these terms where do such people like Hanani fit? The terms do not only mean the Jews who had not been taken into exile but also those who safely returned from exile²⁸⁴ after at least four months of trekking.²⁸⁵

The fact that the exiles do not lose their name of Judah, which is also the name of the territory, leaves others wondering. They do not strip off the others the name Judah but they claim they are the “true” Jews. Will other inhabitants reluctantly lose what they have always known and called themselves as their identity? *Assmann Jan, a professor of Cultural Studies, is of the view that memory is very important as it is the basis for living in groups and communities and being in groups and communities is key to building a memory.*²⁸⁶ Group memory plays an important role for Israel throughout this normative formation of the group identity. In this context, Israel is revolving around the exile memory to continue forming and redefining themselves. The community was able to establish its identity based on some historical trail. This “Israel” as a distinct group with the same history with the “other Israel,” but with exclusive experience in Babylon, were able to live together in solidarity as a single group based on their past in Babylon. It was a group identified with the exile memories, without which, probably it was going to be problematic to identify “others” from “them.”

The Babylon returnees in identifying their group, were clear with their stance on Yahweh and marked clearly who was a member of the in-group and who was not despite some similarities which could have existed with other groups, still differences were found. Hensel observed that:

The Samaritan YHWH-worshippers likewise understood themselves as “Israel,” were perceived as such from outside, shared a “common Pentateuch” with Judah and operated their own central Yahwistic sanctuary. Literarily and ideologically, a clear, restrictive boundary between the two denominations of “Israel” was drawn over the polemic.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁴ Clines 1984, p. 137

²⁸⁵ See Ezra 7:9 for a clue of the time frame of the journey.

²⁸⁶ Assmann J (2010) 2016, p. 15 *Communicative and cultural memory*

²⁸⁷ Hensel 2018, p. 148

They shared the same name of Israel, and worshipped Yahweh, yet they belonged to a different group and therefore not associated with this returnee. Hensel says that this:

“... Samaritan YHWH-community is declassified as a group that is impure, ineligible for the cult, and multi-ethnic, and consequently delegitimized as representatives of “Israel”; the Ezra-tradition stands in line with a tradition of “foreigner” polemic against the Samaritan that continues up to the modern period.”²⁸⁸

Agreeing with that, Williamson asserts that, some of the returned Jews, in addition to Ezra and Nehemiah failed to relate amicably to the religious and communal life of the Samaritans.²⁸⁹ According to the returned Jews, notes Hoerth, that Samaritans had ‘blurring of religious values.’²⁹⁰ Through these details, some of the returned Jews had gross problems with accepting the identity of the Samaritans and a line of definition had to be drawn between them.

The returned Jews emphasised monotheism and not polytheism and because of these two practices in faith, a clear boundary had to be drawn. There was a clear separation of those who worshipped Yahweh in Jerusalem and those who worshipped Yahweh in Gerizim. Becking asserts that religiously, both groups vied and claimed to be real worshippers of Yahweh. The returned Israel continued to worship in Jerusalem while the Samaritans founded their worship centre at Gerizim. Both groups claimed that God had chosen their place as a true place of worship.²⁹¹

From the above arguments between the groups, living in the geographical boundary of Judah or being a descendant of Israel did not guarantee one a place in the in-group of the returned Israel. Turning to the six features of group identity, devised by Hutchinson and Smith, the group of the returned Jews is establishing its identity around an element of common culture and in this instance, it is religion and language. Other elements such as shared historical memories and a sense of solidarity can be considered but the issue of religion and language are more pronounced.

²⁸⁸ Hensel 2018, p. 147

²⁸⁹ Williamson 2004, p. 23

²⁹⁰ Hoerth 1998, p.385

²⁹¹ Becking 2011, p. 110

Boundary Issue

In this Chapter, there are two significant points of drawing the boundary which have been discussed in detail. These were non-negotiable, thus marriage and stemming from that was language. Israel needed to marry within the group but since that had already been violated, it became a problem. This ethnic group needed only to marry from within the in-group. Language too became an issue. Israel need to reaffirm the continued use of Hebrew among the in-group members.

Conclusion

Finally, in this episode, has highlighted the main problems of the time and the impacted Judah. These problems were mainly two – mixed marriages and language. The Judeans who returned from exile married wives from ethnic groups other than theirs, bore children and most of those children were illiterate in Hebrew language, both in the written and oral. Hebrew the language of the cult, was threatened with extinction.

Marriage has always been socially, politically, economically, and religiously important as it can be an agent of exceedingly change; it establishes status, it can provide a structure for raising children, for pooling resources, strong property and financial expectations are met, it brings about security both to the immediate couple and to some extent the broad family in some societies that treasure and have strong ties of extended families.²⁹²

Finally, through its activities, the Judean community proves it is alive, it is living in a reality. Not only is this community linking itself up with the ‘former Israel’ through the present happenings but also in many other ways. Like any other living community, they have unique problems and try to solve them. They know that they should live according to the given rules, commandments and laws given to the past Israel.²⁹³ They are not only separating themselves from the out-groups,

²⁹² Winslow 2018, p. 5. This is unpublished work entitled, Ezra’s “Holy Seed”: Marriage and Othering in the Bible.

²⁹³ See what Judah knows about the present and the past on Nehemiah 1:7-9

but they are striving to keep up with the law. They are trying to order their community²⁹⁴ – purifying spaces and also people who had to.²⁹⁵

In the context of Nehemiah 13, a question is raised: Does diversity smoothly go along with the advocated group identity of the immediate post-exilic era? From the issues raised and discussed in this research, the following points are drawn: (a) while it was important to recognise and appreciate diversity and focus on it and new perspectives it would have brought to the community, Nehemiah found himself caught up in a challenge of continuing to redefine who was in his perspective a “true” Jew. Of course, that course of action had its own results that this research focussed on. Going by the course taken by Nehemiah, those who were not of the purported Jewish genealogy were excluded; and, (b) while it is important to make definitions, such as of identity in this context, but as soon as the definition was made, then it inevitably drew borders. Lines of separation were made, thus, and inclusion and exclusion came in. The elaborative Deuteronomic law was key in redefining the identity of Israel. In all odds, the stranger among Israel was not allowed to marry from Israel. Israel had the obligation of marrying only within their own ethnic group in order to keep its identity.

²⁹⁴ See Nehemiah 13:3, 9, 13, 17, 19, 21, 30

²⁹⁵ See Nehemiah 13:9, 22, 30

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion from Nehemiah 13, which concludes the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, captures several problems and challenges that the people of Judah faced in their quest to faithfully seek God. Most importantly, it gives the details of Nehemiah's efforts as a governor in Judah, giving a picture of unified collective effort and personal leadership efforts to bring about change. In so doing, the following conclusions are noted:

In the opening three verses there is concerted efforts in learning about the precepts set by Yahweh for Israel. It is not an inaugural gathering but follows a set pattern as it was required of Israel to conduct its communal religious life. Focusing on the words written in the book of Moses, the crowd becomes aware that in their midst, both in the house of God and in the community, they were mixed with people they needed not to mix with according to the law inscribed in the Book of Moses. There it was clearly written that they need not to mix with the Ammonites and Moabites. Whilst acting together as a community, the Israel separated herself from the Ammonites and Moabites but elongated this short list to include others who were summarised as all who were not of Israeli descent. This exclusivity of action practised by the Israelites who returned from Babylon in Nehemiah 13:1-3 showed that the group was founded on the law and it identified itself with Yahweh, its god. On the other hand, the exclusivity meant that the group's identity was shaped by the laws of Yahweh as given in the past to Israel. By excluding others from the in-group, Israel was also defining herself and also defining who others were. A narrow definition of Israel is thus established.

In the next episode, Nehemiah 13:4-9, the intensity of the exclusivity is vividly seen by the expulsion of Tobiah from the heart of the group's community, its religious centre. Tobiah was expelled by Nehemiah from the house of God in Jerusalem. Therefore, Nehemiah was more than ready to purge out anything else and anyone else who fell outside this group's definition. Not being on the list of the returnees recorded in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 meant the group's membership was

sealed. No one from outside would be part of the group without him or her having lived and experienced exile in Babylon. Those two features, specially related to this episode, made it impossible for anyone who did not experience the Babylonian exile to get into the in-group or to be viewed as a true worshipper of Yahweh.

In the episode that follows (13:15-22), moreover, points out the importance of the law of Sabbath observance²⁹⁶ but also Israel's failure to keep the law. For the sake of the Sabbath, Israel was to worship Yahweh on the Sabbath and separate herself from all other works. That is what made Israel different from other nations that were around her. "Babylonian returned Israel" was monotheist. Through vigorous means the Israel starts to honour the Sabbath, business on the Sabbath is banned. The city gate was closed, and the Levites after purifying themselves were placed at the gate to ensure no one goes out or enters to do business. At the end of the episode, Israel is known as community of Yahweh worshippers.

After the above episode, a similar account of the problem that Ezra dealt with resurfaces (13:23-28). The persistent issue of mixed-marriages, thus, marriages between the returned Jews and either Jews whose ancestors never went into exile in Babylon or a marriage between any of the other people who were summarily mentioned as people of the land, is brought into focus. Nehemiah emphasises his determination to phase this out. The returned Jews were not to mingle with the Canaanite tribes, Ammonites and Moabites, Ashdodites, Arabs, Tyrians—all of whom were categorised as people of the land. Both leaders made attempts to end the mixed-marriages. Ezra (Ezra 10:44), a detailed account of those involved in such marriages was composed whilst Nehemiah never gives a list of names but a list of how he dealt with the involved people. He rebuked them, called curses on them, beat some of them, pulled their hair and made them take an oath in the name of God. At the height of tension, one of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib was expelled from the community. They agreed to have the issue resettled at a later stage through an agreed channel (Ezra 10:14). However, that lasted for a short time as Nehemiah was faced with the same mixed marriage issue (Nehemiah 13:23-28). The mixed marriages accounted in Nehemiah 13 and that narrated in Ezra 9-10 can be said to belong to the same period, and the two

²⁹⁶ See Exodus 20:8-11 and in Deuteronomy 5:12-15

accounts saved for the same function in this community. This account not only shows the group identity of Israel but also the identity of an Israelite family in the Judean community in post-exilic period.

To sum up, the role played by Nehemiah in this Second Temple period in the life of the Judean community is very vital. The community needed recognition and an identity in a context where communities were characterised by their diversity. As a result, its own identity appeared to be at stake in the face of nationalities within the group and around this group. The group moved towards exclusivity and separation (13:3) in a way of consolidating its identity. Foreigners who forced their way among the community were unceremoniously ejected (13:8). The Sabbath day observance was reinforced in all Judah (13:22), its homeland. Language as a communication tool to their god became irreplaceable and raised interrogative discontent (13:24). Mixed marriages (13:23; 25-27) were questioned and a genealogy list was used to keep the group's identity and to pinpoint the group's members and to pointed out those who do not belong to the group. The general members of the community were counselled and those from the priesthood family that embraced mixed marriages were expelled from the community (13:28).

The activities in all the episodes also had a bearing on the internal relations of the Judean community, though that is not explicitly expressed. However, a critical look at the episodes tension within the group especially at the time those who accommodated Tobiah saw their crony evicted by Nehemiah. There could have been tensions regarding authority as priests were expected to have more authority that over the house of God and its activities that a political leader would have. The punishment given to some members of the Judean community in Jerusalem who were engaged in mixed marriages to some, it was a disgracing act that reduced their reputation in the eyes of the public. The expulsion from the community of a member of the priestly line, Joiada, for failure to divorce his foreign wife, could simply be said it left the family confused and divided especially that it was clearly stated in the Book of the law that members from the priestly family should not involve themselves in mixed marriages.

These cited changes were significant in shaping the group's identity and reforming Israel's religious practices based on the group's understanding and contextual interpretation of the law in

the book of Moses. The more Israel was having the knowledge of the law, the more her boundaries became clear and the harder it became for outsiders to be accepted into the in-group.

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