



COMMUNITY FORMATION IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH

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Bethany Theological Seminary

Our Topic

One of the central concerns of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is the formation of community, specifically in bringing together of the returnees from Exile and those who remained in the land.

By examining the wide range of practices employed and issues addressed in the process of forming the community, we are able to better appreciate this biblical text as well as glean insights into larger questions of how community itself is formed.

- Why Ezra-Nehemiah?
- Why not Chronicles or something in Science Fiction?

Our Focus: Community Formation Practices

- Rituals
 - Festivals
 - Renewing Covenants
 - Making Covenants
 - Sacrifice
 - Fasting
 - Prayer
 - Reading Torah Together (with Interpretation)
 - Applying Torah to Present Circumstances
- Economic Practices
 - Cooperation (Collusion?) with Empire
 - Taxes, Tithes, Debts, Interest
- Boundaries
 - Rebuilding Temple
 - Rebuilding Walls
 - Intermarriage and Ethnicity
 - Sabbath Observance
 - Leaders and Laity
 - Israel and the nations

Historical Context of Ezra-Nehemiah

Babylonian Exile	(586-539 BCE)
Persian Period	(539-333 BCE; book covers 539-433)
Ezra 1:1-4:3	(539-522; reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses)
Ezra 4:4-5; 4:24-6:22	(522-486; reign of Darius)
Ezra 4:6*	(486; reign of Xerxes)
Ezra 4:7-23*; 7-10	(458; reign of Artaxerxes I; arrival of Ezra)
Neh 1-4; 6:1-13:5	(445; reign of Artaxerxes I; Nehemiah, first term as governor)
Neh 5*; 13:5-31	(433; reign of Artaxerxes I; Nehemiah, second term as governor)
Neh 12:10-11**	(c.370/332; high priests, ends with Jaddua)

Historical Context of Persian Period

- Policies of Toleration (and Taxes)
- Empire funds building of various local temples, which serve as local taxation centers
 - Is the Temple complicit with Empire?
- Local autonomy, oversight by Persian provinces; Persian spy network
- Empire emphasizes Persian ethnicity at highest levels
- Codification of local laws, by Udjahorresnet in Egypt
 - Parallel to Torah at time of Ezra?
 - How “Persian” or “Pro-Persian” is Torah?
 - “law of God and law of king” (Ezra 7:26)
- War with Greece in reigns of Darius, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I
- Time of great cultural change in pluralistic context
 - Unification through common language (Aramaic) and money, but not legal codes or religion. Issues of identity surface.

Literary Context of Ezra-Nehemiah

- Single book in ancient world and in Jewish tradition
- Traditionally, Ezra was author, but finished by Nehemiah (*Talmud, b. Batra* 14b)
- Scholarly consensus until 1960's-1970's was an anonymous editor responsible for Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah as one unit, known as "the Chronicler"
- Since 1970's, scholarly consensus strongly sees Chronicles as distinct work from Ezra-Nehemiah
- Ezra-Nehemiah's own composition history is incredibly complicated, with multiple sources being incorporated, and various redactional layers suggested. This is gaining more interest in recent publications
 - Placement of Nehemiah 8 and source documents are central issue

Literary Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah

Ezra 1-6:

Ezra 1-2:

Ezra 3-6

Ezra 7-10:

Ezra 7-8:

Ezra 9-10:

Nehemiah 1-4, 6-7:

Neh 1-2:

Neh 3-4, 6:

Neh 7:

Nehemiah 8-13, 5:

Neh 8-10:

Neh 11-12:

Neh 13:

Neh 5:

Initial returns from Exile, rebuilding temple, opposition

initial journeys and arrivals of the Golah (returnees from Exile)

rebuilding temple and opposition

Ezra's journey, arrival, reforms

Ezra's journey and arrival

intermarriage crisis and reforms

Nehemiah's journey, arrival, rebuilding walls, opposition

Nehemiah's journey and arrival

rebuilding walls and opposition

"Israel" settles in land

Torah, separation, covenant, "Israel"

covenant: reading of Torah and separation from foreigners

[center unit of Ezra 7-Neh 13]

"Israel" organized

separation and reforms

reforms within "Israel"

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Rebuilding Temple

- Temple site is focus of Ezra 1-6
 - Continuity with past through temple vessels and site itself
 - Appointment of priests and Levites
 - 20 years of age and up is lower than 30 years in Numbers 4 (3:8)
 - Priests with trumpets and Levites with cymbals, according to directions of David, something found only in Chronicles (3:10)
 - Priests and Levites organized according to Mosaic Torah (6:18)
 - Prophets Haggai and Zechariah give supportive words (5:1-2; 6:14)
 - Culminates in dedication service involving priests, Levites, and returned exiles (6:16-17)

Rebuilding Walls

- Walls of Jerusalem is focus of Nehemiah 1-4, 6
 - Nehemiah uses “we” and “us” language in talking with the people, rather than “I” and “you”, and without placing blame (2:17)
 - Based on the details, Nehemiah seems to have the people rebuilding wall sections nearest to their own houses (3)
 - Recognition of progress along the way, not just waiting until end (4, 6)
 - Half its height; gaps beginning to close
 - Repeated appeals for God to aid them in the project
 - Narrative culminates in the public reading of the Torah by Ezra (8)
- Resistance from “people of land” and provincial leadership to both rebuilding of temple and walls

Festivals and Covenants

- Booths/Tabernacles, found written in Torah (Ezra 3:4-6; Neh 8:13-18)
- Passover and Unleavened Bread (Ezra 6:19-22)
 - Emphasis on the “returned exiles” who kept the festival
 - Separation of people from the “pollutions of the nations of the land” in order to worship
- Festivals follow Torah, at least ideally
- Multiple covenants mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah

Prayer and Fasting

- Prayer permeates Ezra-Nehemiah
 - Personal (Ezra and Nehemiah)
 - Corporate
 - “Penitential Prayers” in Ezra 9 and Neh 9, both coming after periods of fasting (personal and corporate)
 - Uses language from tradition, applying to present situation
 - Appeals to God’s *hesed* and to God’s justice
- Fasting: 4 references in Ezra-Nehemiah
 - Prior to proclamation of Penitential Prayers (Ezra 9 and Neh 9)
 - Preparation to speak to king, personal (Neh 1:4)
 - Prior to second part of journey, for safety, corporate (Ezra 8:21)

Sabbath Observance

- Sabbath is not mentioned in Ezra
- People covenant to do variety of things, including specifically not buying merchandise or grain from “peoples of the land” on Sabbath (Neh 10:28-31)
- In Nehemiah’s second term as governor, he finds Judeans not keeping covenant, but treading wine and buying fish and other things from Tyrians on Sabbath (Neh 13:15-17)
- Nehemiah states exile was result of failing to keep Sabbath, as in Jer 17 (Neh 13:18)
 - Fear of going into exile again hangs over the book
- Nehemiah commands city doors shut and guarded on Sabbath to prevent trade (Neh 13:19-22)
- Nehemiah threatens foreigners with violence if they persist in camping outside city on Sabbath (Neh 13:21)
- Sabbath in Nehemiah is about limiting trade with foreigners (economics?), rather than a day of rest
- Community has a unique practice that helps to define itself

Cooperation (Collusion?) with Empire

- Persian Empire supports Temple, including resources
- Persian Empire has political authority
- God influences events and specifically relationship with Empire
- God “stirs up” spirit of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1)
- Nehemiah believes God is gracious to him as evidenced by Artaxerxes honoring request, which was Nehemiah’s prayer (Neh 1-2)
- Ezra given authority to implement Torah by Artaxerxes (Ezra 7)
- Darius requires Jews to pray for himself and his children in the temple (Ezra 6:9-10)
- Community able to do what it does because of relationship to Persia

Taxes, Tithes, Debts, Interest

- Nehemiah rebukes people for improper economic practices (Neh 5)
 - Debt slavery; interest charged on loans in violation of Torah
 - Nehemiah refuses his own personal portion to be provided as governor
- Community of those separating themselves from foreigners make covenant to engage in specific economic practices (Neh 10:28-39)
 - No commerce with foreigners on Sabbath
 - Fulfill seventh-year sabbath for land and removal of debt
 - Pay yearly one-third shekel tax to temple
 - Bring firstfruits and tithes of produce
 - Tithe of tithe given to Levites
- Actions based on specific laws in Torah (Exod, Lev, Num, Deut)

Interradical, Ethnicity, Foreigners

- The relationship to foreigners is a huge issue in Ezra-Nehemiah, and specifically the intermarriage of Jewish men and non-Jewish women (and among leaders)
- Genealogy of priests used to limit who is counted as one, labeling those “not on the list” as unclean and excluded (Ezra 2//Neh 7)
 - Only time a genealogy is explicitly used as a means of exclusion
- Intermarriage crisis of Ezra 9-10 claims that the “holy seed” has been corrupted by this mixing (9:2). Extension of this “holiness” idea to the whole people.
- Continuing this practice of intermarriage will lead to God’s punishment
- Intermarriage crisis results in mass divorce and forced exile of women and their children, with men under threat of property forfeiture and expulsion (10:3, 8, 44)
- Reforms in Ezra 9-10 need to be done again by Nehemiah about 25 years later (Neh 13). What has Ezra been doing during that time? Why did this reoccur?

Intermarriage, Ethnicity, Foreigners

- No sense of being a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6; 49:8)
- Liturgical Refrain at temple project: “God is good, his *hesed* endures forever” adds “toward Israel”—unique to Ezra 3:11, and more restrictive
- Scholars have discussed at length reasons for the community’s resistance to intermarriage
 - Hypergamy: Israelite men “marrying up” (Smith-Christopher)
 - Distinction between returned exiles and those who remained behind, who are latter considered as foreigners by the returnees (Eskenazi and Judd)
 - Community under trauma, anxiety, stress with need to draw boundaries (Ben Zvi)
 - Sectarian, survivalist mentality
- Matrilineal descent unique to Ezra-Nehemiah before Rabbinic/Roman period (Cohen).
 - Innovation in practice, not found elsewhere in Hebrew Bible.
- Application of *limited* exclusion to exclusion of *all* foreigners (Neh 13:1-3 and Deut 23:1-9)

Intermarriage, Ethnicity, Foreigners

- Easy to reject these actions (but not by everyone).
 - Are they descriptive or prescriptive? How do we know?
 - How do we understand them contextually: historical, literary, canonical?
- Community self-definition focused on boundaries around “blood and speech” with distinctive practices and laws
- Ezra-Nehemiah demonstrates one means of forming community, with a mixture of “positive” and “negative” practices.

Whole Community Gathered around Torah

- Nehemiah 8 celebrates community including women and children hearing the Torah and understanding the Torah
- Levites explain what has been read “with interpretation” so it could be understood (8:6-8)
- Time of celebration, eating fat, drinking wine, and providing for poor (8:10)
- “joy of the LORD is your strength” (8:10)
- People are able to rejoice because they understood the words declared to them (8:12)
- Community gathered around the Word, which they are trying to understand, with help of the leaders, and result is joy

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