

# The nature of the conflict in Ezra-Nehemiah<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The text of Ezra-Nehemiah reflects a severe conflict situation in post-exilic Judaeen society. However, the text is unclear about crucial issues such as the identity of the parties involved, the aims of the different parties, and even the roots of the conflict. A close analysis of the text reveals that what is portrayed as an external conflict clearly has a serious internal dimension too. The heart of the conflict lies not so much in disputes over land and building rights, but rather in the central issue of access to the community of returned exiles.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The text of Ezra-Nehemiah reflects a severe conflict situation in post-exilic Judaeen society. In fact, whilst the text relates only a limited number of events from the history of the post-exilic Judaeen society, each of these is characterized by stark conflict.

Within the narrative, different socio-historic situations are thus presupposed, yet in some way or another these have all been integrated into one literary presentation. The result is that the reader often gets the impression that the text, in essence, relates one continuous conflict. And this conflict in Ezra-Nehemiah, on the surface at least, seems to be external, reflecting conflict between the Judaeans and various outside parties. On closer examination, however, a number of issues in the text render this first impression problematic. This leads to the first part of the present investigation into the nature of the conflict narrated in the text of Ezra-Nehemiah.

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The second part of the investigation concerns the issues at stake in the various conflicts that are narrated in the text. On the surface, once again, things seem plain enough: the conflict primarily revolves around the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem. A closer look at certain aspects of the text, however, reveals that there is probably much more to the conflict than initially meets the eye.

This article, then, aims to show that

- what is portrayed as an external conflict in fact has a serious internal dimension;
- the heart of the conflict lies not so much in disputes over building rights, but rather in the central issue of access to the community of returned exiles.

## **2. EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL CONFLICT?**

Ezra-Nehemiah certainly reflects serious conflict between the Judaeans returned from exile and other parties, in particular the non-Judaeans inhabitants of Jerusalem and environments. As narrated, the conflict initially derives from the Judaeans' refusal to allow others to participate in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. This leads to opposition from local inhabitants, opposition which is, according to the narrative, sustained over an extended period of time (Ezra 4-6).

In similar vein, Nehemiah's initiative to restore the wall surrounding Jerusalem immediately results in serious conflict with various non-Judaeans parties (Neh 2ff). Since the moment of presenting his credentials to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates, Nehemiah has to put up with fierce opposition from a number of local leaders (Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab), themselves probably also representatives of the Persian king in their own communities. And gradually it becomes clear that Nehemiah is not only clashing with a number of prominent individuals, but rather with other ethnic groups (the Arabs, Moabites and the people of Ashdod).

Internally, though, the Judaeans seem to be united. They share a common history that stretches back all the way to Abraham and that eventually culminated in their collective return en masse from the exile in Babylonia. In fact, the Judaeans are commonly referred to simply by means of the generic term **יְהוּדִים** and without any further

qualification (eg Ezra 3:1, 10:9, Neh 5:13; 8:1; 11:1). They have a common heritage and share the same plight, representing the remnant (פְּלִיטָה / אֲשֵׁרִית) of the people earlier taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezra 1:4; 9:6-15; Neh 1:2, 3). Moreover, their unity is also suggested by the way in which different terms (אֲשֵׁרִית, זְדִירָה, זְדִירָה וּבְנֵיהֶן) are used interchangeably to emphasize the Judaeans' continuity with the pre-exilic kingdom of Judah and the long-gone united monarchy of Israel.

The narrative also emphasizes the fact that the Judaeans share the same ideals and act in unison, as evidenced by frequent references to "the whole people" (כָּל-הָעָם / כָּל-הַיְהוּדָה) undertaking an enterprise "as one" (כְּאֶחָד; cf Ezra 3:1, 9; 6:20; Neh 8:1). In describing the rebuilding (Neh 3, 4) and dedication (Neh 12) of the city wall, the narrative portrays a remarkable solidarity amongst the Judaeans. This impression is confirmed by the elaborate descriptions of large gatherings of the people which, again, expresses remarkable solidarity (Neh 5, 8, 10). This is finally echoed by the solidarity and mutual support found amongst the Judaeans' political and religious leaders (e.g. Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14; Neh 8:13).

And yet there are a number of indications in the narrative that suggest serious internal strife. The first such indication, when families are mentioned who could not prove their Israelite origin (Ezra 2:59-60//Neh 7:61-2), is not much more than a hint of what is to come. Their inability to prove their Israelite origin clearly implied the possibility of being excluded from the present Judaeans' community, which could obviously then lead to tensions within the Judaeans' community (cf Eskenazi 1992:584).

Such tensions are reflected in the meeting called to disband the mixed marriages. Internal strife is already suggested by the serious threats accompanying the call to all returned exiles to attend the meeting: anyone not present within three days would himself be cut off from the community and his possessions confiscated (Ezra 10:8). Why would such serious threats be necessary if the matter to be discussed was not contentious? That everyone, in fact, was not in agreement on the issue is evidenced by the fact that four persons (Jonathan son of Asahel, Jahzeiah son of Tikvah, Meshullam and the Levite Shabbethai) are shown to go against the stream in opposing the dissolution of mixed marriages (Ezra 10:15). Were these four men perhaps named explicitly because they were actually the leading figures representing the sentiments of others left unnamed? Be that as it may, what is more important is that the narrative only names them, but does not

afford them a voice to explain their view. The same obviously applies to the more than 100 men who are forced to divorce their wives of non-Judaeen origin. How likely is it that they would have supported the exclusivist ideals of the majority?

Another indication of significant conflict within the Judaeen community is to be found in the narrative about Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem and the restoration of the city wall. On his arrival, Nehemiah does not trust the local leaders enough to disclose his intentions to them (Neh 2:16). After subsequently commencing the process of rebuilding the wall, the Tekoan leaders, for some undisclosed reason, refuse to take part in the work (Neh 3:5). Furthermore, the burden placed upon the Judaeen community by the work, as well as the stress caused by the external pressures, also leads to complaints (Neh 4:4-10), making it necessary for Nehemiah to encourage the people to persist with the work (Neh 4:8-14).

The incident described in Nehemiah 5 in fact reveals significant tensions within the Judaeen community. The narrative reports some poor Judaeans complaining to Nehemiah about severe exploitation by their wealthy kinsmen, literally leading to the enslavement of their children in an attempt to appease their creditors. Nehemiah handles the situation by calling a large public meeting, where the wealthy land-owners return confiscated property and relinquish (some?) further claims they had against their debtors. Although this incident represents an isolated case of internal strife in the narrative, and although the situation was apparently resolved easily, even unanimously (Neh 5:12-13), it does at least reveal severe economic tensions within the Judaeen community.

Internal tension is also indicated by Nehemiah's accusations that a number of people within the Judaeen community (specifically Semaiah and Noadiah) were attempting to intimidate him and to lure him into a trap (Neh 6:10-14). He also refers to active correspondence and close ties between prominent Judaeans and his arch-enemy, Tobiah. These people would even defend Tobiah before Nehemiah and assure him of Tobiah's good qualities (Neh 6:17-19).

And finally it is remarkable that both Tobiah (probably the same one called an Ammonite in Neh 2:10, 19, 3; 35<sup>2</sup>) and his son, Jehohanan, have Hebrew names and are

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<sup>2</sup> Although the text nowhere confirms that the Tobiah mentioned in Neh 2-6 is the same person as the Tobiah mentioned in Neh 13, this is likely for two reasons: (1) one would expect the narrative to clearly distinguish between two prominent characters with the same name, and (2) it is clear from both Neh 2-6 and Neh 13 that the Tobiah mentioned has close ties with prominent people in the Judaeen community.

married to Judaeans wives! In fact, it seems that Tobiah is even related to the High Priest, Eliashib, who is reproached by Nehemiah for offering Tobiah accommodation in the temple (Neh 13:4-9).

Recognising, therefore, that there probably was not only external conflict (between the Judaeans community and other groups in the area) but also serious internal conflict (within the Judaeans community itself), it becomes important to determine what actually lay at the root of the conflict.

### 3. SOME CRUCIAL ISSUES IN THE CONFLICT

What then lies at the root of the whole conflict? At first glance one might suspect that the conflict in the narrative hinges on the resettling of large numbers of returned exiles and their attempts to rebuild the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem. However, not all the conflict narrated is related to the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls. Indeed, the fact that the conflict was not only external, but also internal, suggests that there was more to it. Precisely because the narrative is so vague about a number of crucial issues, and in particular the identity of the parties in the conflict and their respective aims, it is necessary to take a closer look.

In the first instance it is striking that, in the conflict over the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4-6), the narrative is very vague about the identity of the parties. In the narrative the people offering help to rebuild the temple are introduced right at the outset as “the enemies of Judah and Benjamin” (Ezra 4:1). The only further information offered in the text concerning these people is that they were earlier brought here by the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon – in other words they are, in the view of the narrative, foreigners. These facts led Ackroyd – after dismissing suggestions to identify these people with the Samaritans as anachronistic – to make the following cautious remark: “We should rather recognize the probability that a conflict of views among groups *within the community* is being conducted with the kind of vituperation which is all too common in religio-political quarrels” (Ackroyd 1991:123; my italics – WCvW).

Secondly, the narrative offers no satisfactory explanation for the motives of either the Judaeans or their opponents. The so-called “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” provide a religious motive for their offer to help rebuild the temple, saying that they have long

been worshipping the same God. To this the Judaeen leaders respond by raising a political objection, the command of the Persian king. However, this rebuttal seems unwarranted by Cyrus' command, which is not formulated in exclusive terms in either Ezra 1:2-4 or Ezra 6:3-5 (*contra* Schultz 1980:234; Williamson 1985:50; Throntveit 1992:25-26).

In addition, the fierce reaction to this rebuttal – amounting to intimidation (Ezra 4:4), bribery (Ezra 4:5) and continuous complaints to the Persian king (Ezra 4:6-16) – is not explained by the narrative either. Such reaction must surely be rooted in more than just a feeling of rejection. That those outside the Judaeen community indeed experienced the unilateral reconstruction of the temple as a threat, is implied clearly by including the misplaced and anachronistic letter of Rehum and Shimshai (Ezra 4:9-16) and the extended correspondence between Tattenai, Shethar Bozenai and king Darius (Ezra 5-6) at this point in the narrative. Why then, could one ask, is the temple such a threat to people who might not worship there? Surely, neither the mere existence of the building nor the religious ceremonies performed there could realistically pose such a severe threat.

Here I want to offer a suggestion. I would like to suggest that the ensuing animosity actually stems from the exclusion of the local population from the community of returned Judaeen exiles, since the Judaeans' greatest asset was neither a building nor the gifts for the temple, but rather a dynamic community. In all probability, this community returned from the heart of contemporary civilization possessing certain skills, contacts and material means to further their own interests more effectively than the local population (*contra* Smith-Christopher 1994). In addition, a reconstructed temple would ensure growing numbers of people flocking to Jerusalem – where the Judaeans would then effectively control the temple. And by controlling the temple, the Judaeans would also be in a position to control both the local economy and society at large.

This fits in very well with the issue of mixed marriages described in Ezra 7-10. The whole aim of Ezra's actions is to exclude the local population from the Judaeen community. This is quite clear from the formulation of Ezra 9:1-2 (RSV):

The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the

Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.<sup>2</sup> For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.

And although the motivation given for dissolving the mixed marriages is primarily religious, it goes hand in hand with a more materialistic motivation, namely to ensure that the Judaeen community will continue prospering: "Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever" (Ezra 9:12; RSV – notice the purpose clause introduced by *וְאַתָּם*). In the face of competition for land and resources, maintaining an exclusive Judaeen community thus serves the interests of members of this community. This is confirmed by Smith-Christopher (1994:247) who asserts that sociological studies have indeed shown that such considerations often play a prominent role in the propagation of endogamy.

In the book of Nehemiah, the narrative describing the conflict over the rebuilding of the city wall in many respects resembles the earlier narrative on the reconstruction of the temple. Once again conflict erupts over a building project. Once again the reasons for the opposition to the building of the wall are not properly explained in the narrative – Sanballat's fears of rebellion against the Persian king (Neh 2:19; 6:6-7) can hardly be seen as legitimate, being expressed immediately after the narrative reports Nehemiah handing his letters of authorization from the Persian king to the local governors (Neh 2:9). Moreover, Nehemiah immediately denies these accusations, and the rest of the narrative in no way suggests to the reader that the Judaeans are even considering rebelling against the Persian king.

The narrative thus once more fails to give a satisfactory explanation of the interests Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people from Ashdod are trying to further. And it remains similarly unclear why the rebuilding of the properly authorised city wall provokes such fierce reaction, this time in the form of

mocking the builders (Neh 3:33), plotting to attack the city (Neh 4:2) and personally harm Nehemiah (Neh 6:2).

Ackroyd (1991:101), in fact, speculates about possible rights that Sanballat might have been claiming in Jerusalem: territorial rights, legal rights and customary rights. Yet he too admits that the text simply does not provide enough information to determine what material benefit there could be inside the city for the non-Judaeans living in the environs of Jerusalem. I would therefore like to suggest once more that the asset to be protected by means of the wall is not so much the city itself, but rather the community inside!

This, in fact, seems quite probably to be the case if the measures taken by Nehemiah after the completion of the wall are taken into consideration. Immediately after completion of the wall Nehemiah institutes measures to control the entry to the city (Neh 7:1-3). Although these do not prevent non-Judaeans from living in Jerusalem (cf the reference to Tyrian merchants, Neh 13:16), they do prevent outsiders from interfering with community life in the city. In addition, the door is opened for strategic demographic shifts to ensure that a certain group exercises control over a certain area, such as is reported concerning the relocation of Judaeans from the rural areas to Jerusalem in Nehemiah 11:1-2.

The rebuilding of the city wall thus provided the Judaeans with a secure locality where, for the first time, they could congregate and worship as they wished (cf the contrast between Ezra 3:3 and the extended festivities narrated in Neh 8-9). Within such a locality it was possible to introduce measures aimed at reflecting the unique character of the particular community, such as the prohibition of Sabbath trade (Neh 10:32; 13:15-22), the introduction of a Sabbath year in which all fields would lie fallow (Neh 10:32) and measures for the upkeep of the temple and sacrificial service (Neh 10:33-40; 13:10-3). And, finally, the rebuilding of the city wall gave the Judaeans a base from which they could exclusively further their own economic interests without taking anyone else into consideration.

Whilst it is clear, then, that the narrative itself is quite vague both about the proper identities of various parties involved in the conflict described and about their interests and aims, I believe it is possible to come up with a plausible explanation for the conflict. But



such an explanation should take cognizance of the fact that the narrative does not overtly portray the real extent of conflict within the Judaeen community, and that it also does not offer satisfactory explanations concerning the issues at stake in the conflict and the intensity with which the various parties seek to either ensure or prevent the reconstruction of the temple, the community and the city wall.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I am convinced that the narrative purposefully intends to highlight external conflicts and hide the extent of internal strife within the Judaeen community. The community of Judaeans is idealized and isolated from other communities. For this reason I agree with Brockington (1969:72):

The Chronicler has probably simplified the picture by reducing the people to two interested parties, the one being returned Jews who were eager to rebuild Jerusalem and at the same time to foster purity of race and worship, the other being the "adversaries", among whom he clearly included not only the Samaritans but by implication all people in Judea who were not returned exiles.

By covering up the extent of tensions within the Judaeen community itself, and by being vague about the identity and motives of all other parties, the narrative aims at presenting events as a conflict between a unified Judaeen community and malicious outsiders. Every description of conflict puts the "enemies of Judah and Benjamin" in a bad light. Even if the motives of the Judaeans are not always unambiguous, they at least seem to be religious in nature. By contrast, however, it always remains unclear exactly who their opponents are and what possibly legitimate motives they might have had for their actions. Furthermore, the narrative often shows these opponents resorting to subversive means in order to achieve their aims. It thus becomes evident that the narrative wishes to arouse sympathy from its readership for its Judaeen protagonists, thereby at the same time precluding any debate on contentious issues within the Judaeen community itself.

The vagueness about crucial issues involved in the conflicts surrounding the rebuilding of the temple and the city wall serves exactly the same purpose. The narrative

wishes to distract the attention of its readers from matters that could be controversial within the Judaeen community, such as the issue of the exclusivity of the community. For this reason also the conflicts surrounding the rebuilding of the temple and the city wall are presented as external conflicts instigated and continuously fuelled by malicious outsiders.

However, by recognizing how the identities and motives of “the enemies” have been ignored or distorted in the narrative, and by explicitly linking the roots of the conflicts surrounding the rebuilding of the temple and the city wall to the conflict about an exclusive Judaeen community in Ezra 7-10, it becomes possible to give a plausible explanation for all the conflict related in Ezra-Nehemiah: the heart of the conflict lies not so much in disputes over building rights, but rather in the issue of access to the community of returned exiles. And at the time of the composition of the text, this was evidently still a sensitive issue within the Judaeen community.

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