

# **Emphasis on human action in Ezra and Nehemiah as an at least partly possible result of their exposure to the Persian ideas culture**

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The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue the incomplete theme of II Kings but their theme is of a reconciliation between the Lord and his chosen people and their stories are quite different. In the previous era Yahweh himself took mighty action on the Jews' behalf but now Israel acts on behalf of the Lord. They again become covenant partners but on different terms. The Persian kings permitted Judean exiles to Babylon to migrate to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple the Babylonians had destroyed.

These books depict a smaller nation supported by a much larger diaphoric population. Jews get involved in assuring the progress of the nation. Esther and Mordecai foiled the plot of two court eunuchs to murder the Persian king and later, defeating a large one against the Jews of Persia, made his mark at the Babylonian court. However, Nehemiah, "is the first in whom this ideal is embodied in an unmistakably historical setting," according to Miles.

A third significance was acceptance of Persian kings by the party in power in Israel and its opting for socio-religious self-segregation as an alternative to political independence, though it met with considerable opposition, from some in-country Judeans who resented the strict observance of endogamy and Sabbath rest as a requirement for racial identity. But the mission of Ezra and Nehemiah "will become Judaism as we know it and will prove the salvation of the Jews," asserts Miles.

What Miles observes here forms the basis of his thesis: "The boldness of these Jewish moves is not accompanied, however, by a return to boldness on the part of the Lord God. The very stress in these books on the devotion of the Jewish leaders to the Lord and the eagerness of the people to please him, repenting as soon as their sin is pointed out to them, had a paradoxical effect. It makes the Lord seem less like the Jews' creator, liege, father, or king and more like their enfeebled but cherished ward. His may be the honor, but theirs is the vigor." However, I see here similarities with the Persian thought the Jews were exposed to during the Persian rule, even as it is not possible to trace them for obvious reasons. In contrast to the invincible God of Moses and the "recalcitrant" Israelites led by Moses out of Egypt, the

immigrants led by Ezra and Nehemiah are “by contrast the picture of piety. He (Moses) himself, however, in their company, neither speaks nor acts. It is for this reason that this prelude to their story seems a coda to his. Back then he seemed to be creating them as his people; now, they seem to be preserving him as their God.” (p. 373).

## Ezra

The book of Ezra declares that the Lord “rouse(s) the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation” allowing delegation of Jews to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple destroyed by the Babylonians. But is the king acting on his own, and is the action just being attributed to the Lord's rousing? This scenario of captive Israelites setting out for the promised land is quite reminiscent of the exodus from Egypt when the Lord was intent on exercising his power to harden Pharaoh's heart so as to not allow the Israelites to leave Egypt, since a victory without any defiance was not good enough for him.

In the end in Babylon the Jews responded to the (Persian king's) proclamation positively and sent a delegation to Jerusalem, and those who preferred to continue staying in Babylon provided the emigrants “with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with livestock, and with precious objects...”(Ezra I:6). The Persian king also returned to the Jews the precious temple furnishings Nebuchadnezzar had carried off.” (p. 374).

But the local opposition halted the construction of the temple, the opposition, strangely, coming from people interested in building it, non-Israelites whom the Assyrian conquerors had settled in the land and who had started worshipping Yahweh.

“Let us build with you,” they pleaded, since we too worship your God, having offered sacrifices to Him since the time of King Esarhaddon of Assyria, who brought us here” (Ezra 4:2). But their offer was denied:

“It is not for you and us to build a House to our God, but we alone will build it to the Lord God of Israel, in accord with the charge that the king, King Cyrus of Persia, laid upon us.” Thereupon the people of the land undermined the resolve of the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build. (4:3-4).

They (the Samaritans) then denounced the Jews to the Persian king: “We advise the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, you will no longer have any portion in the province Beyond the River” (4:16) – the area west of the Jordan. The Persian

King then withdrew the decree of restoration: "This city is not to be rebuilt until I so order" (4:21) and the Samaritans then stopped the Jews from rebuilding the Temple. But "urged on by the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah son of Iddo ... they brought the building to completion..." (6:14) with the renewed permission of the king.

But one may ask "what was the Lord God's role regarding the reconstruction?" He "roused the spirit of King Cyrus" at the start, but does the text include him just as a gesture? If the Lord is the true agent, then why does the work stop when Cyrus' successor wants it stopped (and I may add when the Samaritans want it stopped) and resume when the successor's successor wants it resumed?" Did the Lord not see the need, like in the past, to confirm his will for his own people and ensure their well being against any enemies.

Rather than run the risk of offending any one's sentiment as a non-Jew about the might of the Lord, I choose to quote Miles verbatim as necessary throughout this essay. "One may also ask what was whether he has abandoned the ambition he once expressed to have all nations acknowledge him at this temple in Jerusalem. If the Persian king, a non-Jew, may decree the rebuilding of the temple, making it to that extent his own project, why may the local non-Jews, some of them Israelites, not take part as well? It would seem that the Persian King is, at least at the practical level, a more important authority than the Lord God. When the "people of the land" offer to help, the Jews do not say that the Lord God has forbidden this, nor does the Lord appear in person to say, "I forbid this." Instead, Persia is invoked: "We alone will build it to the Lord God of Israel, in accord with the charge that the king, King Cyrus of Persia, laid upon us" (4:3). The devotion to the Lord God of Israel is surely sincere, but these words suggest inescapably that the Lord is now Israel's ward, rather than vice versa." (pp. 375-6).

The Lord God was never more overwhelmingly dominant than when through Moses he gave Israel his law. Therefore, it is surprising that the law, like the temple, has come under the patronage of the king of Persia. Ezra, "a scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses" whose lineage extends back to Moses' brother Aaron, receives a commission from King Artaxerxes.

"For you are commissioned by the king and his seven advisers to regulate Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care... And you, Ezra, by the divine wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to judge all the people in the province of Beyond the River who know the laws of your God, and to teach those who do not know them. Let anyone who does not obey the

law of your God and the law of the king be punished with dispatch, whether by death, corporal punishment, confiscation of possessions, or imprisonment. (7:14, 25-26).

Miles believes that this law was either the Torah or the book of Deuteronomy. “everything suggests that the king reviewed this written document and simply subsumed it to the law of the empire. Ezra’s law, in Artaxerxes’ view, “reports” to Artaxerxes’ law as Ezra himself reports to Artaxerxes.”

According to Miles, the Jewish view of this relationship is not much different because Ezra responded: “Blessed is the Lord God of our fathers, who put it into the mind of the king to glorify the House of the Lord in Jerusalem, and who inclined the king and his counselors and the king’s military officers to be favorably disposed toward me” (7:27) Although the Book of Ezra begins with a brief narrative foundation: “The Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus...,” there is no such narrative foundation for the imposition of Jewish law. We do not read, “Then the Lord God put it into the mind of the king to impose the Lord’s law...” We have rather an action of the king given a theological interpretation by Ezra.”

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah do not contain any narrative foundation and therefore strangely evince a modern character: “Though they never discuss unbelief, they also never present belief as unavoidable in the face of the mighty acts of God.” (p. 377).

In Ezra and Nehemiah God is not passed over in silence, but worshipped and referred to frequently, and in various ways he continues to be supreme, but he is a far cry from the demonstrated supremacy of old. “He lives on, yes, but the vitality of the Jews palpably exceeds his own.” (p. 378). (Zoroaster would not have wanted it any other way as he exhorts humans to be godlike in every way and bring on renovation (*Frashokereti*), there being no other way about it. Even the Achaemenian rock inscriptions reflect such notions.)

Even as this suggests the status of the Lord God from demonstrated to attributed power, the long prayer in Ezra 9:6-15 shows a parallel retreat from prophecy to preaching. In the original Israelite prophecy, God speaks to Israel and calls on her to act. In the Psalms, Israel speaks to God and calls on him to act as its savior. Ezra 9:6-15 is evidently a combination of both: Ezra does speak to God, but it is not God but Israel whom he calls on to act. When Ezra feels tormented by the unforgivable sin by some Israelites marrying local women “so that the holy seed has become intermingled with the peoples of the land” (9:2). Ezra asks a rhetorical question nominally

of God but actually of his followers:

Now, what can we say in the face of this, O our God, for we have forsaken Your commandments, which you gave us through Your servants the prophets when you said, “The land that you are about to possess is a land unclean through the uncleanness of the peoples of the land, through their abhorrent practices with which they, in their impurity, have filled it from one end to the other. Now then, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons; do nothing for their well-being or advantage, then you will be strong and enjoy the bounty of the land and bequeath it to your children forever.” After all that has happened to us because of our evil deeds and our deep guilt—though You, our God, have been forbearing, (punishing us) less than our iniquity (deserves) in that You have granted us such a remnant as this—shall we once again violate Your commandments by inter-marrying with these peoples who follow such abhorrent practices? (9:10-14)

As Ezra and later Nehemiah were so well exposed to the Persian court, I wonder if they were impressed in any way by the Persian custom of marrying within the race and religion or even by their scrupulousness about preserving their *Khwareh* inner essence or glory. While what we have here reminds us of the Psalms, it is spoken past God to the Israelites.

But the effect of Ezra's “prayer” was quite significant.

“While Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the House of God, a very great crowd of Israelites gathered about him, men, women and children; the people were weeping bitterly. Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel of the family of Elam spoke up and said to Ezra, “We have trespassed against our God by bringing into our homes foreign women from the peoples of the land; but there is still hope for Israel despite this. Now then, let us make a covenant with our God to expel all these women and those who have been born to them, in accordance with the bidding of the Lord... Take action for the responsibility is yours and we are with you. Act with resolve!” (10:1-4)

This tenth and final chapter of the Book of Ezra is followed by a divorce *en masse* and expulsion of children of non-Jewish women.

Miles admits: “By the morality of other peoples and other eras, the

repentance that Ezra urges was morally wrong, while the sin he condemned was not. But taking the morality of the Tanakh as one finds it, one must be surprised not that the sinners are punished but that they are punished so mildly. After Israel's mass fornication/apostasy with the priestesses of the Baal of Peor (Num. 25), the Lord slew twenty-four thousand Israelites with the plague and required Moses to execute all who had lain with foreign women impaling them with their faces to the sun. As for the punishment then inflicted on the Midianites for seducing the Israelites, it was genocidal in character. Nothing so violent as that happens here, and Ezra does not suggest in his prayer that it should. The words of "the prophets" that he quotes are not found as such anywhere in the Tanakh," but Miles finds their nearest equivalents in the injunctions that the Lord gives through Moses in Deuteronomy (7:1-4):

"When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you ... and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord's anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out."

Ezra, however, speaks only of rewards, rather of positive outcomes. The action taken is in accord with the Lord's wishes, but the happy effect of compliance is included and the unhappy effect of noncompliance is excluded. One wonders whether the proverbial tolerance of the Persian kings rubbed off on Ezra while living in their court for long and even if not, which is hardly likely, whether any oppressive actions would suggest defiance of the Persian policy of religious tolerance, so essential for maintaining peace and prosperity in the empire.

"The contrast between the recalcitrance of the Israelites under Moses and the docility of the Jewish remnant under Ezra is striking. In the person of Shecaniah, the remnant exhorts the new Moses, Ezra, to discipline them, and they accept his corrective measure—the expulsion of their wives and their "intermingled seed" – without demurral. To a point, they do to themselves what once God would have done to them, taking upon themselves his role as judge. But the action taken is a correction rather than a true punishment." (p. 380).

Miles posits that "abhorrent practices" of the expelled wives (rather than any mention of their practicing a rival faith or polytheism) may indicate "syncretistic deviations in the practice of the

one received Israelite religion, in which case a reform rather than a mass divorce would seem to be the proper response.

“But if that had been the actual response, the Jews could in short order have been demographically swamped within an enlarged multi-ethnic population worshipping the Jewish God,” as it happened 500 hundred years later when the Jews who started Christianity as a branch of Judaism opened its doors to all.

It is not at all surprising therefore that Ezra was honored as a second Moses when the Jews did become an endogamous, self-segregating nation. “Rules that had quite obviously been flouted for centuries by king and commoner alike began to be strictly observed over enormous initial resistance.” Thus, Miles proposes, the Book of Ezra forms a part of the ending of the life of God.” He is assigned an honored role while his people were immersed in dynamic creativity. “In his end is their beginning.” (pp.381-2), a true realization of *Frashokereti*, *sumum bonum* of our earthly existence – Yasna 30.9, 34.15, 46.19, 51.6, etc., an idea that is even more prominent in the Pahlavi texts of eleventh century including in the *Bundahishn* 3:23-24.

## Nehemiah

Since the last book of the Tanakh is the first and only book in the Tanakh written almost entirely in the first-person by Nehemiah, its placement as the last Book is highly suggestive. Earlier, the Lord God was unquestionably the senior partner, but in the Book of Ezra Israel is becoming the senior partner and a change in the form of the narrative is accompanied by a change in the character of its divine protagonist.

According to Nehemiah I:1-4, Nehemiah when serving the Persian king as a cup bearer and learning that his people who survived the Babylonian exile were “in dire trouble and disgrace,” prays to the Lord to grant him success and “dispose that man (the king) to be compassionate toward him!” (1:5-11).

Even though the chapters of the Book of Daniel are in first-person, they are neither narrative nor historical, but rather mystical, whereas Nehemiah, a human being is uniquely placed in control of the shared history of God and Israel. As Miles notes, “not even King David controls the flow of events as Nehemiah does.” (p. 383). Miles describes at length Nehemiah’s assiduous efforts not only to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem against all odds but also to re-establish the reforms started by Ezra (pp. 383-390), all the while trusting his own ability to do so even as he attributed his success to God. And as he

says in 5:14, he did it all without “eating the Persian governor's food allowance.” But once Jerusalem is established as a fortified city, no further mention is made of Persian kings but instead the theme returns to Ezra (Nehemiah 8-10), “and, therewith, in a new way, to God.” (p. 86).

Comparing the Lord's acceptance of the ratification of the covenant at Mount Sinai, (which left no doubt that he is a main partner in the making of the covenant) with the reading of the law in Nehemiah 8-10, Miles posits that the mind of God is objectified in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah which are now written down for the benefit of every Israelite. They contain all that God needs to say and God does not need to speak again and he does not, leaving it to his vicars to know and interpret His Law.

“Actions that once God would have taken on behalf of the Jews,” observes Miles, “statements that he would have made to them, they now take and make for themselves. God is still God and the only God. They are still no more than human beings. And yet in a strange way, he and they exchange roles.” (p. 355). This was indeed an internal development in the Judaic thinking, but, I wonder if that was also spurred on and inspired as the post-exile Jews came to know more about the religion of their Persian kings that emphasized the role of men as collaborator (*Hamkaar*) of God and God actively seeking the cooperation of men as well as women (Yasna 53.6) for bringing about the renovation of the world, God even exhorting mankind to be like Him in every way – Yasna 34.1, 44.18,47.6, etc. All such concepts may have consciously or unconsciously gotten infiltrated into the Jewish psyche and society, especially because of the cordial relations between these two races that has never been surpassed and also because in view of the intellectual curiosity of the Jews. However, it seems difficult, if not impossible to ferret out actual evidence for such an ideological phenomenon and therefore it has to be judged mostly on the basis of possibility or plausibility at present. In any case, it provides further evidence for exploring the ideological similarity between the two races, which requires more adept hands and resources than mine to explore, especially as such a possibility has not been explored so far to the best of my knowledge.