

Notes from Joseph Blenkinsopp's Book on *The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism*

- **Introduction**

- Religious Evolutionism - the change from "Israelites" to "Jews"
- The Deuteronomistic author represents the beginning of the end of prophecy, the "purest" form of religious expression, and gives way to legalism
 - There are believed to be four Schools of Authorship that represented different modes of recording the histories and mythologies of Ancient Israelite culture and were later edited together to become what we now know as the TaNaKh or Hebrew Bible. They are the Yahwist or Jehovist, the Elohist, the Priestly, and the Deuteronomist. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah appear to mainly be works of the Deuteronomist (particularly the same as those responsible for the Books of Chronicles) and the Yahwist, along with excerpted memoir material from the historical Ezra and Nehemiah themselves.
- **Guiding Questions for our course of study:**
 - When does a distinctive social group identity begin to emerge in the aftermath of the liquidation of the Judean state/the deportations to Babylon, and how is that identity constituted?
 - When does it become proper to translate "*Yehudim*" as "Jews" rather than "Judeans"?
 - How are we to assess the degree of continuity-discontinuity between national identity before the great divide and the distinct

groups competing for legitimacy after it? (i.e. How do we understand the timelines for the Samaritans, Judeans that stayed in Judea, returned exiles, etc. that all consider themselves “Israelites” but are now split into different groups vying for access to the rebuilding projects and reclamations of Temple worship?)

- What historical realities underlie the narratives of the Biblical Books?

- The rebuilt Temple was as much an instrument of Imperial control as it was a replacement for the first Temple that represented the holiness of the Kingdom of Israel.
- Ezra’s mission to “return to Zion” was as much a religious colonization effort to impose a policy of ritual ethnicity based on his own rigorous, selective, and by no means self-evident interpretations.

- **Chapter 1: Origins**

- There has NEVER been a single, unitary, and linear Judaism.
- “Ethnicity” - those human-made groupings that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical features or of customs or both, and/or because of collective memories of colonization and migration
 - Sometimes these groupings or origin traditions are imposed from the outside to serve some polemical purpose, but stick and bind people together anyway
- In Ezra-Nehemiah the terms “Israel,” “Israelite,” “the people of Israel” are only used in reference to those that have returned from exile, even in the letter from Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:15.

- The term “Judah” originates from the son of Jacob, and was long used only to describe the tribe and the hilly region of Israel in which they lived.
 - When the kingdoms split around 930 BCE under the reign of King Rehoboam (who remained king of Judah while Jeroboam became king of Israel), the term Judah also came to refer to the southern kingdom of the Israelite people/in the land of Israel, and could refer to any citizen of that kingdom, which included members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.
 - The liquidation of the nation-state and the beginning of a diaspora identity created a new situation for those who had previously defined themselves with reference to the kingdom of Judah.
 - There was likely tension and possibly even open conflict between the Benjaminites and Judeans, stemming from Saul and David, and still lingering in the formation of the “Judean/Jewish” identity in Babylon and Persia.
 - Roughly contemporaneous with the return to Israel from Persia (mid-5th century BCE), there was also a Jewish settlement on the island of Elephantine just outside of Egypt (not clear to me where they came from). The residents of this island were also referred to as “*Yehudim*,” though it is certain that none of those settlers had ever stepped foot in the hills of Judah and it is in fact likely they were descendants of the northern tribes. The Egyptian chronicles that inform us of the Elephantine Jews never once mention “Israel” or “Israelite,” but the description of their ritual practice leads scholars to draw their lineage back to the northern tribes.
 - During the time of the reconstruction of the Holy Land, especially the third phase under Nehemia’s guidance, the term came to carry

more ethnic-religious connotations rather than ethnic-geographical. Those that returned from exile, had access to the Temple and the imperial power, and those who fell in line with Ezra and Nehemiah's decrees about proper adherence to Torah and God, came to be understood as "*Yehudim*" while others who worshipped HaShem but were not or did not allow themselves to be subject to the Temple-State, were considered "Hebrews" or "Yahwists" or other related but distinctly outsider terms.

- The book of the prophet Zechariah, who was a lead figure in the first wave of returned exiles, is dated to about 520 BCE. He uses "*Yehudim*" seemingly as "Jews" more-or-less as we would understand the term today. This usage is even more settled by the time of the final edits of Esther in the late 2nd century BCE (though tradition holds that her story would have taken place much earlier, following Nehemia chronologically, telling of life back in Persia for the Jews who decided not to return to Israel).
- Understanding the term "Jews" in this context, one could make the argument that Jewish peoplehood was established by the Persian empire (see above for definition of ethnicity and outsider influence).
- There is much in the Book of Ezra to lead us to believe that his mythos was greatly exaggerated - the letters from the Persian governments recording in our Bible may not represent true correspondances and many edits may have been added later. Nehemiah is believed to be a more accurate depiction of his historical person, more of the narrative written in his first person believed to actually be written by him. Parts of Ezra-Nehemiah that seem to echo one another (or echo that which is found in the Books of Chronicles) may be pieces of narrative that

originated with one and were added into the other for literary purposes, and for elevating the importance of Ezra the Scribe/Priest.

- The lists in both Ezra and Nehemia of those who returned from Persia to the land of Israel seem to imply that these are all direct descendants from those who had been exiled, and the marriage debacle at the end of Ezra suggests that all those who returned from exile had remained pure while in Persia. However, only a handful of the names named reflect Israelite or Judean heritage conclusively. Many indicate Yahwist worship but do not reflect ancestors of Israelite origin. At least one is a definitively Persian name. This leads scholars to believe that A) this list was likely added later and not a true reflection of those that went in the three distinct groups that the Bible describes returning from exile; and B) not all those considered “Judeans” or “Jews” of the proper order were really so pure as they claimed.
- As mentioned, those who chose to fall in line with the demands of the leaders who returned from exile could be accepted into the “in-group,” those with the imperial support to rebuild and those with the power to set the new norms for the establishment of mainstream Judaism for the time. If they divorced their foreign wives, paid their tithes, listened to Ezra’s law, etc., they could become considered “Jews” instead of “Hebrews” or “Samaritans” or whatever they were before. Any who did not fall in line, including those who had come in the first voyage from Persia and had enjoyed some imperial support but did not follow Ezra’s law, would be excommunicated with dire economic and social repercussions.

- **Chapter 2: Ezra**

- References to the exile throughout the Bible depict it as total, that there were no survivors left in Judah. This is not accurate, and is a means of

storytelling borrowed from other ancient near-Eastern cultures as a way of dramatizing one's tragedy and as such subsequent return to victory.

- The exiles return to the Holy Land from Persia and appear unsure what to make of the reality. Some parts of Ezra-Nehemiah speak of the ease with which they resettled and took charge, other parts speak of the hostility from "those that were in the land". It seems the various authors, perhaps from different time periods, were not in agreement with how to characterize the situation or were experiencing different responses from the people in the land, and the editors and chroniclers did not smooth out the contradictions.
- When Nehemiah describes Ezra's reading of the Torah, I always imagined this to be for the sake of simply hearing and establishing the custom of a public Torah reading as a ritual thing, the way we do it now. But it seems with the context provided by Blenkinsopp that it was more like Ezra giving directions on what the Jews were supposed to be doing now - he reads and translates and interprets the laws regarding Sukkot, and all the people set about building their sukkah and preparing for the holiday, presumably for the first time.
- Scholars believe the sequencing in the books does not follow historical chronology. Rather, should be:
 - Second Wave Immigrants arrive in the 5th month (Ezra 7:8-9)
 - Ezra reads Torah in public and establishes Temple-State law (Nehemiah 7:73-8:2)
 - Marriage crisis address (Ezra 10:9)

- The mishandling of the marriage crisis almost undoubtedly lead to failure for the Jewish people shortly after the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah ends in our texts.
- 57 years pass between chapters 6 and 7 - the middle of the Book of Ezra finally turns its attention to the character of Ezra in which he represents a new beginning after a relative failure of the first wave of immigration (they succeed in rebuilding the Temple but not really in establishing Jewish law or effective rule in the Holy Land).
- Historical Ezra was likely a scribe in the Persian court, an official and rather elite position. He may have also been a priest/descendant of Aaron, but did not have any role in the Persian Jewish community that established his priesthood (as distinct from Ezekiel the prophet, whose priesthood continues to be a factor in his life in exile). He almost definitely was not authentically High Priest, as he is name in one passing reference.

- **Chapter 3: Nehemiah**

- Most of this chapter repeats/offers more source texts for information above, or offers comparisons of the literary styles of Ezra-Nehemiah to the stylings of other ancient cultures, namely Greek and Egyptian. While interesting, they are a bit esoteric and ultimately not that useful for our course.
- One useful note was that in part of Nehemiah's "memoir" narrative, a pattern unfolds that to me seems to mirror the cycle we see in the Book of Judges:
 - Enemies conspire against the Jews
 - The "righteous" whose numbers and resources are limited, call on God for help

- They form battle lines according to tribes
 - They are reminded that God is on their side
 - The evil plans of the enemy are thwarted
 - The Jews must praise God and recognize their covenant to God and Torah
- In the Book of Judges the cycle is:
 - Israelites each do what is right in their own eyes
 - This disorganization among them and lack of adherence to God's plan makes them vulnerable to attack by outsiders
 - A charismatic leader rises up and prays on behalf of the Israelites for God's help
 - Charismatic leader defeats enemy or leads Israelite warriors to defeat the enemy
 - Everyone praises God and remembers their indebtedness to God's mercy
 - In Nehemiah 10, Nehemiah establishes a new covenant with the Jewish people. However, this is very different from those that have come before for Israelites, different that the traditional, bilateral, deuteronomist *berit*. This is a unilateral "sworn covenant" that Jewish people must agree to if they want to be "in". It doesn't seem to offer much in return, other than recognition of their very existence.

- **Chapter 4: Ezra-Nehemiah: The Roots of the Ideology**

- By the time Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, the Babylonian Jewish community has existed for nearly a century and a half.
 - From what we know about Babylonian culture, settlements, and feudal associations, life for the Jewish community in captivity was probably not all that bad. Conquered peoples were generally allowed to work for pay and integrate into society to some degree, and were also allowed to maintain their nationalist identities of origin and self-govern to some degree.
 - We don't have a lot of information on Jewish-specific settlements or feudal associations from the period of the Exile, but there are Jewish names (names that contain "Yah" or some other reference to HaShem, names that recall the Torah or the Kings of Israel, etc.) that appear in records of professional feudal associations and landholding documents, etc.
 - However, since integration was so feasible, there is also a high likelihood of intermarriage and cross-cultural sharing, so a Jewish name doesn't necessarily mean the person was still identifying or practicing as a Jew in any way, and a Babylonian or Persian name doesn't necessarily mean they weren't!
- More comparisons with the Jewish settlement on Elephantine - turns out their origins weren't just unclear to me from the information given in the previous chapters, but they are actually unknown to historical record. However, what is known in historical record is that much like the early resettlement of the *golah* in Judah, there was a strong connection between the ritual community and the political structures, even though the

Jews of Elephantine didn't have the Temple as was rebuilt in Jerusalem. There were similar strictures that those who wanted "in" to participate in the ritual worship had to follow the political norms, and those who wanted "in" of the cultural or social community had to participate and follow the specific rules of the ritual worship.

- There were some rebellions during the period of transition between Babylonian to Persian rule, leaving some hints that there was actually hope that Zerubbabel (the leader of the first delegation that rebuild the Temple) would re-establish the Davidic monarchy and fulfill the early messianic visions for the Jewish people. Darius squashed the rebellions, and our text has Zerubbabel sort of just vanish from the scene.
- The way Ezra and Nehemiah handle the marriage crises in their community clearly draws from Deuteronomy 7:1-4 but they expand on the list of forbidden peoples to interact with and come down hard on those who transgress rather than wait for God's "wrath to be kindled against [them]".
- There is some evidence that Ezra-Nehemiah (particularly the parts that are written after the lifetimes of either men) draws from Ezekiel, though there is no direct reference. There is a lot in this chapter that shows the parallels, but as we have not studied Ezekiel, I'm not sure how helpful these parallels would be to show here. We will revisit this topic in the fall when we continue our Adult Ed courses with a rundown of the prophets.
 - Ezra-Nehemiah's rules and establishment of what they deemed to be mainstream Judaism seems to be modeled after Ezekiel's visions and behaviors specifically regarding:
 - The exclusion of foreigners from entrance into the temple and participation of its liturgies

- The respective status and duties of the Temple priests vs. the Altar priests (Levites vs. Zadokites - couldn't find a very clear explanation of who the Zadokites exactly were, where they came from, and why they were at odds with the kohanim descended from Aaron) - Ezekiel and Ezra are Zadokites, Nehemiah shores up support from the Levites when he takes over
- The privileges and duties of the Jewish secular ruler (i.e. Governor Nehemiah, not the king of Persia)
- The distribution of territory surrounding the Temple
- There are more potentially eschatological/messianic hints in Ezra's role in rebuilding the Jewish community than may be immediately apparent. But whatever the goals related to that endeavor may have been for Ezra-Nehemiah and their editors/chroniclers, they were clearly halted by the imperial rule over them, so it became muted.

- **Chapter 5: Ezra and Nehemia: History and Ideology**

- Though the book itself would have us believe that Ezra-Nehemiah were the arbiters of "True Judaism," they too come from a particular perspective influenced by outsiders. Much of their ideology and structures of local self-governing is clearly drawn from Babylonian models, and it's no surprise or shame that they brought some of the world in which they/their people lived for 150 years back to Judah with them, if only they could have just admitted that and been more open to other Jewish identities!
- Some scholars deny the historical reality of Ezra, and suggest he was a later invention to draw parallels of other types of leadership that Nehemiah was not. Ezra is more passive, humble (in some ways), and received a

more positive reception upon arrival in Jerusalem. Nehemiah accepts the King's offer for military escort on the journey from Persia to Israel and is a more active leader. Their names rarely occur together in other texts, and in fact Ezra's name rarely appears at all outside of the Biblical account and Josephus. This much at least seems to confirm that Ezra didn't belong in a separate book and illustrates their canonical inseparability.

- Unfortunately, there's not a lot of other Second Temple period material to draw historicity from in any direction.
- Scholars also disagree on the relationship between the Chronicler and the author of Ezra-Nehemiah. It seems that some editing voice of all three is of the same school, but there are some ideological distinctions that illustrated the unlikelihood that the primary author of Chronicles is the same as the primary author of Ezra-Nehemiah (if Ezra and Nehemia even really have the same primary author).
- Pesikta Rabbati: "Why did the Divine Presence not dwell in the second Temple which the community of the exile built? Because it was really Cyrus who built it."
- The Book of Maccabees asserts it was Nehemiah who rebuilt the House of God
- Josephus was known to exaggerate
- The descendants of the "non-Jewish/Judean" worshippers of HaShem continue to play a role in the community, and there are writings from the Hellenistic period that hint to the descendants of Tobiah becoming priests and rising to the upper echelons of Jewish society in Israel during the Hasmonean dynasty (as discovered from the Ben Sira documents from the Cairo Genizah)

- Ben Sira's document also praises Joshua, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah for the building of the Temple and Jerusalem, but does not mention Ezra at all. It is likely that he did not approve of Ezra's behavior in the "marriage crisis" scene, since intermarriage was more tolerated in Ben Sira's time, and it is also possible that he just didn't care to mention Ezra because Ezra didn't build anything and Nehemiah did. It is not possible that Ben Sira did not know of Ezra, even if the historical Ezra did not exist. The writings were well-established by this time.
- There is some apocryphal ancient midrash about Ezra (such as he was the one who ordered the parashiyot of the Torah, and that he had powers of mystical prophecy) but they are even less corroborated than the Biblical account

- **Chapter 6: The Sectarian Element in Early Judaism**

- Sect vs. Cult vs. Religious Denomination - Where does the community of Ezra and Nehemiah fall on this spectrum?
 - Jews at the time are a sect - the respectability of "Religious Denomination" was (and has continued to be in many cases throughout the ensuing millenium) defined by power. There is no central organizing body, no recognition from the political leaders, no "norm" for other sects to clash against. In the days of the Kingdom of Israel, one could say they were a more recognizable "Religion" as such, and of course in later periods as new normative Judaism's evolve and the sociological understandings of "Religion" evolve, it qualifies, but at this time they striking out from the norm (Babylonian/Persian paganism) and [re]establishing new sectarian boundaries

- As the Temple is rebuilt and the normative Judaism of the time emerges, and clear boundaries are drawn about who is “in” and who is “out”, the community of the returned exiles develop more Religion status and those who refuse to conform (who stay intermarried, for example), are effectively forming their own sects.
- Because they remain in contact with one another and with the Persian state, continue to define themselves against each other, and do not isolate, they are not cults
- These were political and ritual statuses, and the political status could vary for people depending on how willing they were to change their ritual observances

- **Conclusion**

- We really don’t know anything
- The origins of Judaism as we know it are found in the two centuries of the Persian Empire
- In the aftermath of disaster (exile), we see many disparate groups coming forward with claims of being the legitimate heirs of those who lived through said disaster, each with their own narrative and rituals and legal traditions passed down from ancestors who claimed to have been THE survivors
- Much of the conflict over these claims came from those that returned from Babylonia. The different sects of Israelites that remained in the land after the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests were mostly cool with each other
- The arrival of the community from Babylonia was less the “return to Zion” our scripture asked for, and more a colonization of a Mesopotamian origin