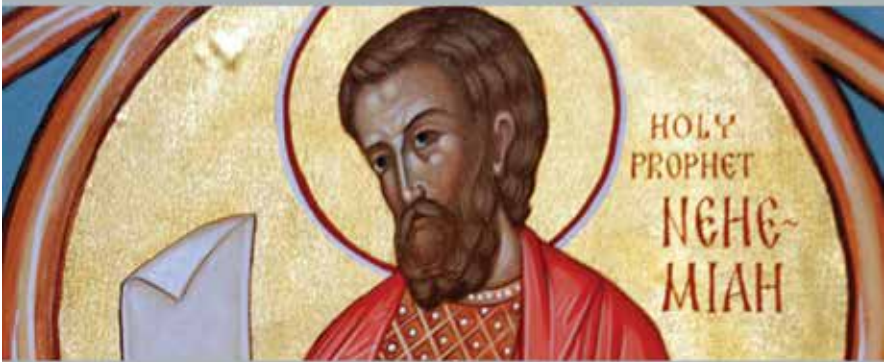


NSBT NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Now and Not Yet

Theology and mission
in Ezra-Nehemiah



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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, the book of Ezra–Nehemiah did not receive the same amount of scholarly attention as some other books of the Old Testament. When I began writing this book several years ago, a visit to Pitts Theology Library at Emory University in Atlanta revealed that there were noticeably fewer commentaries and monographs for Ezra–Nehemiah than there were for other books in the Old Testament. Meanwhile, the considerably shorter Ruth had about the same number of volumes on the shelf as did Ezra–Nehemiah. Why has Ezra–Nehemiah, at least until recently, suffered comparative neglect?

The first reason for less attention having been given to Ezra–Nehemiah is that this book seems to lack literary coherence. Both men, Ezra (Ezra 8:15 – 9:15) and Nehemiah (Neh. 1:1 – 7:5; 12:27–43; 13:6–31), speak in first-person singular, giving the book two first-person voices or what are often called ‘memoirs’. Moreover, a third-person voice reports the first return from Babylon (Ezra 1 – 6), Ezra’s return (Ezra 7:1 – 8:14), Ezra’s handling of the problem of mixed marriages (Ezra 10), Ezra’s reading of the law (Neh. 8), the priest’s confession of sin (Neh. 9) and the people’s repentance (Neh. 10). Aramaic sections, numerous lists and dischronologization in Ezra 4 add to the confusion and make it hard to get a sense of the whole. The person or people responsible for the final form of Ezra–Nehemiah might not have smoothed out the roughness of the compositional process, but a discernible message nevertheless runs through this book. That message will occupy the following pages.

Second, the lists of names make this book less appealing to the average reader.¹ In fact, they mean the book may have a soporific effect.² The story of the post-exilic community is certainly compelling because of the

¹ Angel 2007: 143.

² Eskenazi (1988a: 48) refers to the ‘tiresome specificity’ of the lists.

obstacles encountered and the progress achieved. Even so, the numerous lists interrupt and slow the pace of the narrative. The reader who dutifully tries to look at each name may lose track of the narrative or simply become drowsy. While it is evident that the writer(s) of Ezra–Nehemiah meant to do more than compile the equivalent of a telephone book, the lists seem to work against his or their larger purpose, thereby preventing this account of post-exilic events from being a ‘page-turner’. As will be seen, though, the lists convey rich meaning.

Third, biblical scholars have sometimes regarded the post-exilic era Ezra–Nehemiah describes as little more than an extension of the exile.³ McEntire explains why:

Ezra–Nehemiah is one of the most neglected books in the study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. In the sub-field of Old Testament theology or biblical theology, this neglect is perhaps even more acute. It was easy enough to see why this was the case in the past, when historical approaches to biblical theology placed great emphasis on the ‘mighty acts of God’. The God of Ezra–Nehemiah is not a mighty actor.⁴

In other words, Ezra–Nehemiah supposedly features no forward progress in God’s plan of redemption. Nehemiah 9:10–15 may recall supernatural acts of Yahweh at the time of the exodus from Egypt, but Ezra–Nehemiah records nothing comparable during the returns from Babylon. No miracles occur in Ezra–Nehemiah. Moreover, although Nehemiah 9:22–25 mentions the stunning victories in the wilderness and in Canaan, Ezra 9:7, Nehemiah 9:32 and 9:36–37 speak only of current domination by foreign rulers. Hence, all of God’s mighty deeds on behalf of his people seemingly occurred before the exile, but none in the years after. If, from a New Testament perspective, God’s people must await the birth of Jesus for the next instalment in God’s programme for history (Gal. 4:4–5), post-exilic believers apparently had little or no sense of the ‘now’ in their lifetime – just of the ‘not yet’. According to this view, Ezra–Nehemiah has minimal spiritual vitality with which to encourage and challenge its readers. Perhaps, but Ezra 8:31 credits God with delivering Ezra’s wave of returnees

³ Levering 2007: 25, 32.

⁴ McEntire 2012: 113 (see also 118–119, 123–124).

from trouble on the way from Persia to Judah. The Hebrew verb *way-yaššilēnū* is used of God's saving activity during the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 12:27; 18:8–10), wandering in the wilderness (Deut. 2:36), conquest of Canaan (Josh. 21:44; 24:11) and at other times (Neh. 9:28). Like other generations of God's people, the members of the post-exilic community thought that Yahweh was mightily active in their midst, and perceived typological parallels between their situation and that of their ancestors.⁵

Fourth, some people have considered Ezra–Nehemiah as more legalistic than gracious. For example, Noth thought that the role of the law underwent a change after the exile.⁶ Before the exile, the law specified how the Israelites should live distinctively in covenant with Yahweh. Yahweh initiated the covenantal relationship and then gave the law for the purpose of instructing and guiding his people. The law did not create the relationship but enabled it to grow. After the exile, claimed Noth, the law became detached from the covenantal relationship and so lost its original purpose. If the Persian government used the law to maintain order on the western edge of the empire, the post-exilic community took the additional step of reversing the indicative and the imperative. Instead of God's initiative in the form of the exodus (the indicative) prompting human response in the form of obedience to the law (the imperative), human law-keeping was thought to be the basis of God's favour.⁷ Noth's view, of course, is typical of Protestants who, having been influenced by Martin Luther's polarization of law and grace, consider Second Temple Judaism (Israelite belief and practice after the exile) a religion of works.⁸ To this way of thinking, the post-exilic Ezra–Nehemiah with its interest in reading and practising the law of Moses fell short of Paul's declaration of freedom from the law.⁹

⁵ Kissling 2014: 211–217.

⁶ Noth 1967: 21–23, 76–79, 86–87, 95–96, 106–107.

⁷ See also Eichrodt 1961: 342–349; Moore 1962: 9–13; von Rad 1962: 89–92; Koch 1974: 173–176; Childs 1979: 626; Bright 1981: 440–442; Blenkinsopp 1988: 35; Brueggemann and Linafelt 2012: 404; Saysell 2012: 3–4, 132–134; Wilson 2014: 53. For the effect of this alleged post-exilic turn towards legalism on NT scholarship, see Sanders 1977: 33–59.

⁸ Consider the more balanced but still quite Lutheran approach in Steinmann 2010: 98–103.

⁹ Moore 1962: 236. It is, of course, not unusual to encounter people who think that Israel's belief and practice before the exile were also works-based. For the contrast between the law of Judaism and the gospel of Christianity, see Wellhausen 1957: 3–4, 499–513 and Levenson's discussion (1993: 12–14) of Wellhausen. Wellhausen's discussion of Ezra and Nehemiah is found on pp. 405–410 and 495–498 of the *Prolegomena*. Wellhausen lived before Noth and so influenced his thinking about the OT (Blenkinsopp 2009: 2). The anti-Semitic background of Wellhausen's reconstruction of both Israelite history and the compositional history of the OT is discussed by Wilson (1989: 90–101) and Germar (2008: 23–94).

There is, however, another way to understand the relationship of law and gospel. Saysell, for example, observes:

The recent trend is increasingly to defend EN [Ezra–Nehemiah] against an earlier charge of legalism in the Postexilic Period evident in the writings of such theologians as Eichrodt, Noth and von Rad. The strategy of those rejecting the alleged legalism in EN most often conceive [*sic*] of the Law as being in the context of the covenant following on from God’s gracious deliverance of his people.¹⁰

Moreover, the Old Testament associates the law with God’s mission for an already redeemed people (Exod. 19 – 23; Isa. 2:3; 51:4; Mic. 4:2). The remainder of this book will say more about the missional purpose of the law.¹¹

Fifth, Ezra 9 – 10 and Nehemiah 13:23–27 mention the issue of mixed marriages in the post-exilic community. In both cases, Ezra and Nehemiah the men disapprove of these unions and react rather strongly to the news. Ezra even orders the Jewish men to separate from their non-Jewish wives and mongrel children. Nothing is said about support for these wives and children. Ezra and Nehemiah seem to display callousness, intolerance and xenophobia that contradict the concern of other parts of the Christian Bible for love and mission.¹² Regarding the ‘exclusionary measures’ of Ezra and Nehemiah the men, Laird says, ‘While such tactics and their underlying motifs are no strangers to the human condition, it is disturbing to find them enshrined in what many deem to be sacred text.’¹³ Pakkala represents the usual scholarly understanding of the seemingly harsh response to intermarriage in Ezra–Nehemiah:

In the Ezra source [Ezra 7 – 10; Neh. 8], group identity is closely tied to the Law and Israel’s obedience to it. The Israelites are expected to follow the Law, which separates them from other nations, but those who had remained in the land were unaware of it and had therefore

¹⁰ Saysell 2012: 141–142.

¹¹ For now, see McConville 1985: 131.

¹² LaSor, Hubbard and Bush 1996: 564–565; Satterthwaite and McConville 2007: 264; Harrington 2008: 100–101; Thiessen 2009: 63–79; Moffat 2013: 73; Wielenga 2013: 1; Redditt 2014: 192–193, 296.

¹³ Laird 2016: 1.

taken foreign wives. The author wanted to demonstrate that ignoring the Law would lead the Israelites into the sin of intermarriage with other nations, which has the potential to threaten Israel's group identity and eventually its existence. Group identity and separation from the other is for this author essentially dependent on observing the Law, which lays down the precepts of Israel's exclusive religion.¹⁴

Pakkala, however, never mentions Ezra 6:21, which admittedly lies outside the Ezra source. To be sure, God's people were supposed to live distinctively, but for the purpose of modelling a redeemed community that might attract the nations. This attraction, according to Ezra 6:21, could lead to participating in the covenantal meal. It can be challenging, then, to identify any abiding relevance or redeeming value to the book of Ezra–Nehemiah. The challenge, though, is not insurmountable.

Sixth, the Hebrew Bible may treat Ezra and Nehemiah as one book, but modern translations of the Bible separate Ezra and Nehemiah. Preachers may then miss the themes that run through what is supposed to be a literary unit. If preachers tend to ignore Ezra, they often focus on Nehemiah as a manual for leadership.¹⁵ When this happens, the book of Nehemiah is often approached moralistically in order to identify principles for motivating others to action. At this point, preachers may, in their estimation, be making the most of a book that does not seem to emphasize God's plan of redemption. Even so, Ezra–Nehemiah as a literary unit is also part of the Christian Bible that tells God's grand story of saving activity. God may be concerned about human conduct, but the moral imperatives of the Christian Bible appear in the larger context of God's acts and promises. However exemplary Ezra and Nehemiah the men may be, Ezra–Nehemiah the book is a unified work that focuses not so much on how to be an effective leader but on how to be a godly participant in God's story. More specifically, Ezra–Nehemiah has an interest in how God's people contribute to building the new (and New) Jerusalem, which is God's redeemed community that is bigger than any single person at any single moment. Mission – that is, participating in God's purpose for his world – factors into the message of these books.

¹⁴ Pakkala 2011: 82.

¹⁵ E.g. Getz 1995; Packer 1995; Swindoll 1998; Maciariello 2003: 400–407. For a list of other sources, see Schnittjer 2016: 34.

In the context of discussing the Old Testament as the Bible of the early church, Wilson asks, ‘Would not seminary courses in homiletics be doing students a favor to require that at least one “evangelistic” sermon be preached in class using an Old Testament text?’¹⁶ This NSBT volume assumes, in contrast to much previous scholarship, that such sermons can be preached from Ezra–Nehemiah. Perhaps, though, a better term than ‘evangelistic’ is ‘missional’. God’s people in both Testaments were supposed to have an evangelistic mindset of being a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9) or a channel of redemptive blessing to the nations that, along with the Israelites, needed to experience the transforming grace of God. God, however, has more than individual regeneration and sanctification in mind. God’s people have received God’s law that tells them how to live as a redeemed community. Such a community has the corporate mission of modelling justice and compassion to outsiders. For this reason, God’s law goes beyond personal piety to address matters of social interaction. Nothing short of the transformation of culture is in view. The New Testament, of course, presents Jesus as the redeemer because he – by virtue of his righteous life, atoning death and vindicating resurrection – is the unblemished lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Moreover, God’s aim to make him pre-eminent over creation is the ultimate reason why God created anything at all (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:20–22; Col. 1:15–20). Consequently, living missionally as a kingdom of priests is how God’s people advance his mission of exalting Jesus through the plan of redemption that encompasses every area of life.

So then, in view of these reasons for inattention to Ezra–Nehemiah, this book will avoid a moralistic approach that tries to salvage Ezra–Nehemiah by telling people to be like, or not to be like, Ezra and Nehemiah the men. Modern believers, no less than those who lived during the post-exilic period, are unable to live faithfully without the grace of God ultimately available in Jesus. It is, in fact, cruel to tell people to be faithful like Ezra or Nehemiah and not discuss the prerequisite for faithfulness; namely, faith in the promises of God that ultimately find fulfilment in the person and work of Jesus. This book, instead, will view the book of Ezra–Nehemiah as the record of the beginning of a new work of God among his

¹⁶ Wilson 1989: 112.

people after the exile (Isa. 43:16–21).¹⁷ This new work that led eventually to the first coming of Jesus enables God’s people to be restored presently in their relationship with God. Such restoration involves a combination of hope in God’s promises and obedience to his instruction that has to do with mission. While each of this volume’s chapters will discuss Christian living and so encourage readers to live for something bigger than themselves, the discussion will be rooted in what God has already done for his people and what he will yet do. This interpretive strategy for reading the Christian Bible is called ‘biblical theology’, which is the way the Christian Bible wants to be read.¹⁸ This book on Ezra–Nehemiah is part of a series of studies about biblical theology. The next chapter will say more about this hermeneutic, especially as it relates to Ezra–Nehemiah.

¹⁷ Referring to a new work of God after the exile does not deny the continuity of God’s redemptive plan that runs throughout the Christian Bible. Rather, a new work means a post-exilic chapter in God’s ongoing mission among and through his people.

¹⁸ Stuhlmacher 1995: 1, 64–67, 80, 88; 2002: 189. Vanhoozer (2000: 54), similarly, says, ‘The ultimate goal of biblical theology . . . is not to impose an alien framework onto Scripture but rather to let the Bible’s own theological framework come to light.’

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